STREET & SMITH'S

WILD WEST WEEKLY

NOV. 20, 1937

10¢

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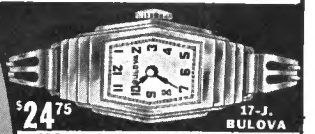

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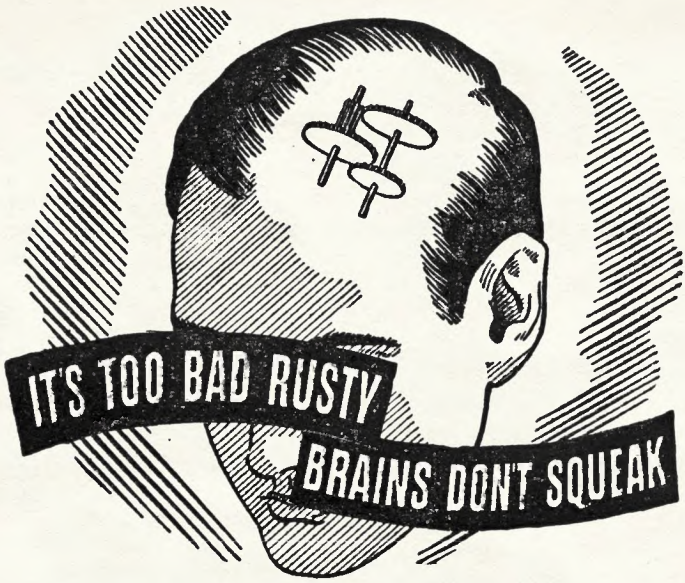

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WILD WEST WEEKLY
FOUNDED 1902

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Vol. 115, No. 3 CONTENTS FOR NOVEMBER 20, 1937 Whole No. 1831

Cover Picture—Scene from "Sonny Tabor At Gallows Ranch" . *Painted by R. G. Harris*

THREE COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES

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All kinds o' gallows are plumb bad medicine fer the young outlaw.

The Ghost Of Tommy Rockford . . *Walker Tompkins* . . 60
He shore is a gun-slingin' spook.

Vengeance Valley . . . . . *William A. Todd* . . 95
The Silver Arrow outfit finds a new range—and plenty o' trouble.

FIVE COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

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Which same ain't a-tall hard fer a gun-wise ranny to find.

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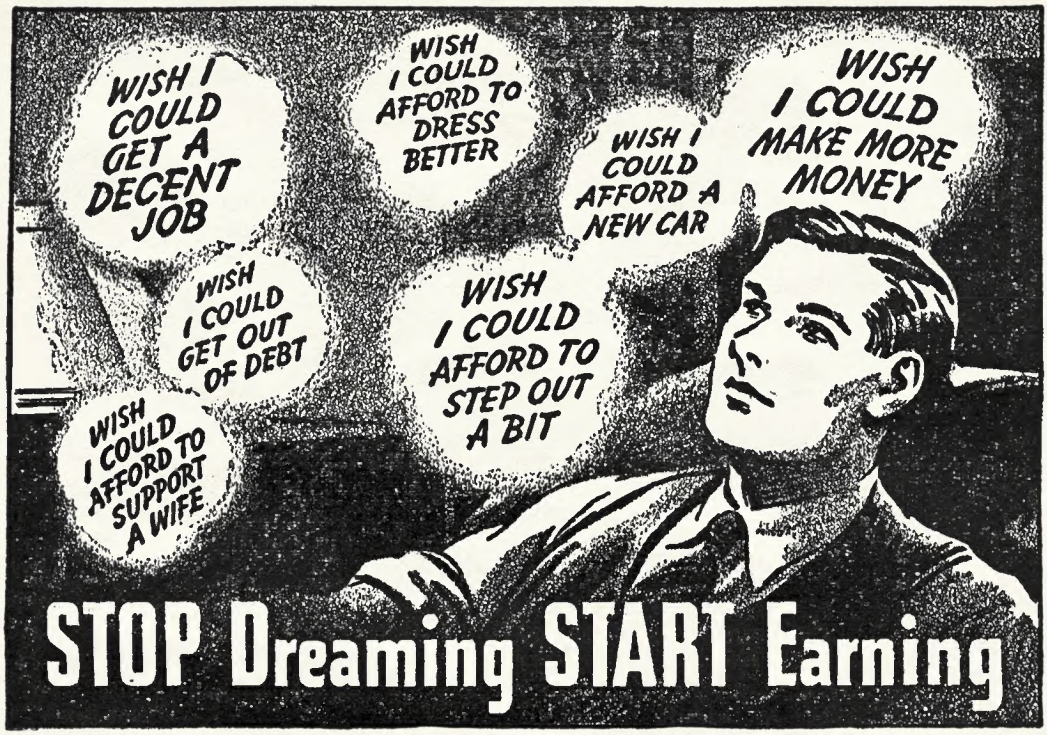

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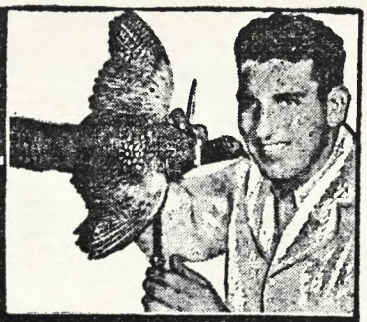

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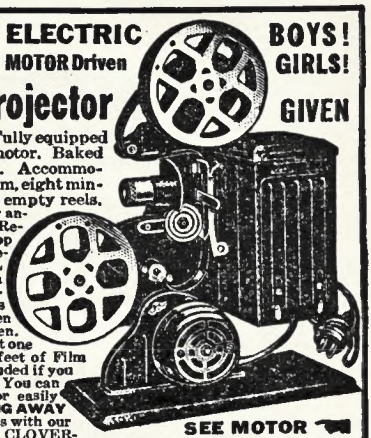

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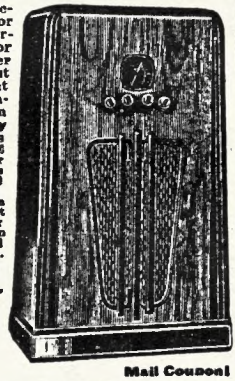

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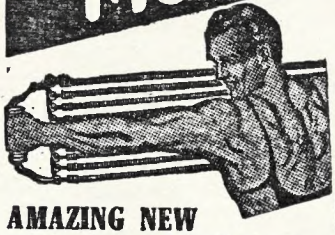

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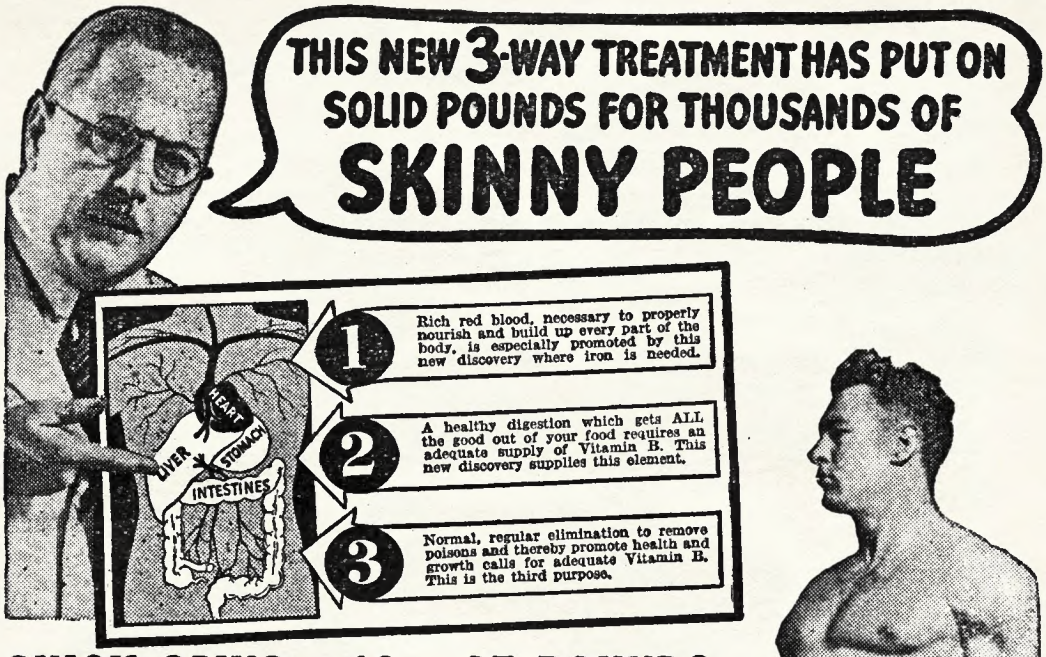

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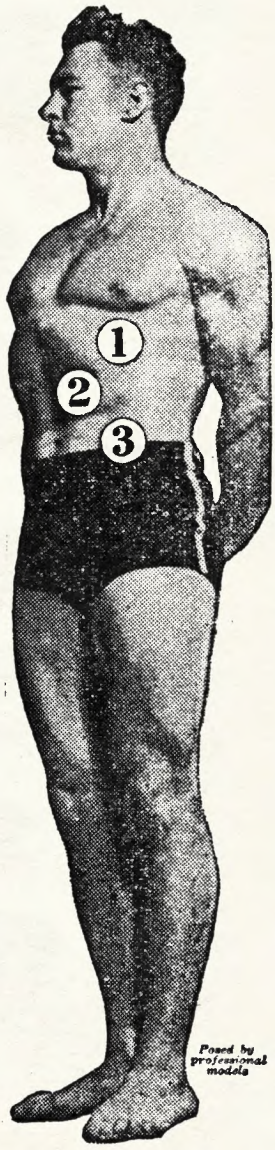

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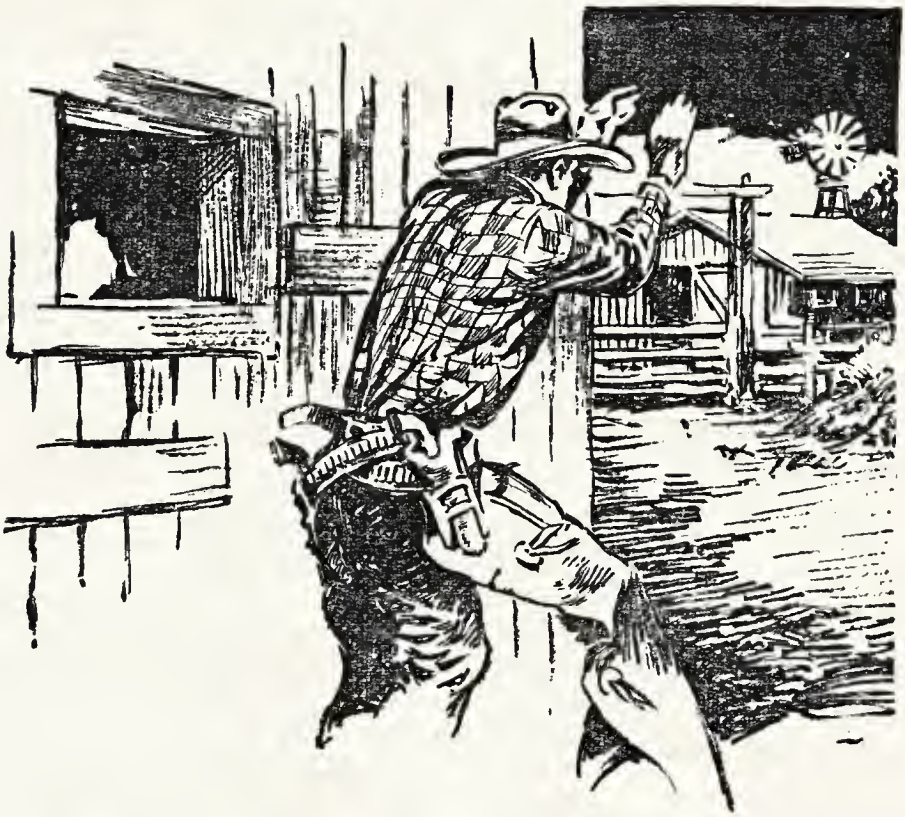


Sonny Tabor At Gallows Ranch

By Ward M. Stevens

Author of "Terror Rides The Pony Mail," etc.

CHAPTER I.

OWNER OF THE RAFTER T.

THE owner of the Rafter T Ranch had had a few drinks too many. It was a scorchingly hot day; although it was only mid-morning the Arizona desert was a flickering furnace of glaring heat, and a wiser man would have been drinking beer, or better still, water. But Joe Cullun was pouring down straight whisky. He was gloriously, uproariously drunk, and he didn't care who knew it.

The War Dance Saloon, disrepu-

table though it was, seemed a cool and pleasant oasis when compared with the torrid sun outside. It was built at a crossroads, a long, thick-walled adobe, and was the only house of any sort within a circle of many miles. Perhaps that explained why the usually careful rancher had overstepped the bounds.

There were several other men in the place and with one exception, they were all drinking with him—Joe Cullun paying. That exception was a boyish-appearing waddy in a checkered blue shirt and brown chaps, standing by himself at the end of the bar. He was lingering over a cool glass of water, and outside in the shade of the saloon his white-and-black-spotted pinto was awaiting him.

Joe Cullun was playing a dollar slot machine, pulling the lever rapidly and with loud enthusiasm. So far, the machine hadn't paid him anything, but the rancher had a huge handful of silver dollars and was feeding them into the maw of the device with hope and regularity.

It was an old-fashioned machine with a huge, clocklike face marked off in different colors. Red and black paid even money, green paid five to one, yellow ten to one, and white twenty to one.

"Thish time, boys, I'm goin' to play yellar," said the ranchman thickly.

He jerked the crank, the wheel spun dizzily for a few moments, and came up on green.

Joe Cullun was not discouraged.

He put in another dollar, pulled the lever, and waited expectantly. He'd played the green, this time. But the machine, diabolically enough, stopped on yellow.

"Boys, she's bound to repeat," Joe chuckled, almost as happy as if he'd won. "I got her dizzy now. She's certain to repeat. Jush watch."

But the machine was apparently more sober than its customer. It came up on red.

Joe Cullun was a heavily built hombre of nearly fifty. His face, flushed now with drink, would have been pleasant, even handsome, otherwise. He was staggering a little now and was becoming more and more intoxicated.

Fawning over the drunken man, buzzing around him like hungry flies, were three men from Gallows Ranch, an outfit that got its name from its peculiar brand, which was shaped somewhat like a hangman's gallows, being a box under an inverted L. These men were "Red" Hunt, Bill Prim, and Webb Stewart, the latter being the foreman of the spread.

They were an evil-faced trio, seeming more like professional gunmen than cowhands. Stewart especially was repulsive. He was a swarthy man of middle height with a hooked nose like a hawk's beak, a thin-lipped mouth, and crafty, unblinking eyes. He wore an ivory-handled gun under his left armpit in a shoulder harness, and another was strapped at his right hip.

"Reckon I'd better stick to red or black." Cullun grinned foolishly, dropping two or three silver dollars and not bothering to pick them up. "A feller's got a better chance with them two colors. Everybody drink up—and wish me luck. Yere goes!"

He lurched heavily into the machine, nearly upsetting it, and yanked the lever mightily. But as he had bet on the black, and red had shown up, he was another dollar poorer.

Teetering on his feet, the Rafter T owner stared owlishly at the multicolored dial of the device, and he had to close one eye in order to see it, at all.

"Well, boys," he announced. "Thish time I'm goin' to play the white. If white win it paysh twenty to one! Thash a lot of dinero. And I got a hunch I'm goin' to win."

Again he pulled the lever, the dial whirred, and Cullun blinked in drunken expectancy. The men who were sponging drinks from him were grinning sneeringly behind his back.

The crazily warped wheel slowed down, jerked, and with a sharp click came to rest squarely on the white. Joe Cullun danced an unsteady jig, whirled his big sombrero and emitted a mighty whoop of triumph.

"I've hit 'er at lash!" he jubilated. "Twenty-sheven dollars I put into this cockeyed whirligig, and now I've fin'ly hit 'er fer twenty iron men. Come on, cough up!"

He held his hat at the opening from which twenty silver dollars were to come pouring. But there was no silvery jingle, nothing whatever. A loud guffaw of laughter went up from the Gallows rannies, and the bartender. The one exception was the youthful hombre at the end of the bar. The stupid, perplexed expression on the big rancher's face had struck them as being comic in the extreme.

"Whash the matter?" Cullun mumbled, turning accusingly to the bartender, a red-faced fat man in a soiled white apron. The rancher's grin had faded, and his beefy jaw was thrust out stubbornly.

"Oh, did I forgit to tell yuh, Joe?" the bartender explained.

"Thet machine is out of order. It's been thet a way fer over a week now. Yere's yore dollar back, friend," and he spun a coin across the bar to the rancher.

Forgetting all about the other dollars that he'd fed the slot machine, Cullun beamed expansively and wrung the barkeeper's flabby hand. He was his pard, Cullun thought. Every one was his pard.

"Thash what I call honesty, givin' me my dinero back like thet," he approved heartily. "Let's all have another drink, everybody."

The glasses were refilled with whisky—the "best in the house," although that wasn't saying much for the quality of it. While it was being poured, the Gallows Ranch men slapped the befuddled Rafter T owner on the back and told him what a good fellow he was. Webb Stewart went even further.

"Yuh know, Joe, I'm sort o' short o' ready dinero this month," he leered. "I was thinkin' of askin' yuh fer a leetle loan to tide me over. Two-three hundred dollars would help a lot, Joe, and seein' as yuh and me have allus been such good friends——"

"O' course Joe will oblige yuh, won't yuh, Joe?" urged Red Hunt, with a wink at the Gallows Ranch foreman. "Money don't mean nothin' to an hombre like Joe Cullun. Why, he sold a big herd o' steers the day afore yisterday. He must've got a pile o' cash fer 'em. Didn't yuh, Joe?"

Cullun was too deeply under the influence to realize that he was being fleeced. He reached for his wallet, and the eyes of the Gallows trio glistened with eagerness at the sight of its contents. Cullun drew out three hundred dollars in fifties and handed the greenbacks over to Stewart. And there was plenty left. Thousands, it appeared to the envious Gallows rannies.

Webb Stewart accepted the bills without thanks—almost grudgingly, as if sorry that he hadn't begged for more.

For the first time, Cullun noticed the young stranger who had been standing quietly at the end of the bar. The rancher blinked at him.

"Why ain't *he* drinkin' with me?" he asked Stewart. "I want every one drink."

The Gallows gang had no intentions of allowing any one else to get in on their "game." Stewart sneered in the kid's direction.

"Leave him to himself, Joe," he shrugged. "He's jist a younker."

But if Stewart and his henchmen could have known who the younker really was, they might have viewed him with more attention—and respect. He was one of the most dreaded outlaws in the Southwest, "Sonny" Tabor. There was a six-thousand-dollar reward for him, dead or alive. He had been twice condemned to hang, and he had killed more men, it was said, than he had fingers and toes.

There was certainly nothing of the bad man in Tabor's appearance. He was in his early twenties, but looked even younger. The old bullet scar in one bronzed and rounded cheek looked more like a dimple than anything else, and his blue eyes were innocent and mild.

Thonged low on each thigh was a Colt .45 single-action, a slow and heavy weapon in the hand of a novice, but the fastest and deadliest of all guns when used by an expert. Crisscrossing his slim waist were two loop-full ammunition belts.

He wore a cream-colored Stetson, and small Coffeyville boots. Nothing unusual in his outfit. Nobody

would ever have taken him to be a hunted man.

Joe Cullun lurched down the bar toward him, scowling a little.

"How come yuh ain't drinkin', kid?" he growled. "Won't take one with ol' Joe, eh? What's the——"

"I don't drink," Sonny told him, conscious that the eyes of Stewart and his pards were glowering down at him.

The outlaw was sorry for Joe Cullun. A fugitive like himself had to be a good judge of human character, and he could see that the rancher, when sober, was a decent hombre, upright and square. And Sonny could see what kind of vultures the Gallows men were.

"Don't drink, huh? Well, son, thash fine!" approved Cullun heartily, laying a hand on his shoulder. "I don' like to see a young fella drink. Got a kid myself almos' as old as you. Glad yuh don't use the stuff. How 'bout a job at the Rafter T, *muchacho?*"

Strangely enough—at least the law would have thought it strange—Sonny Tabor *was* looking for honest range work. He was not an outlaw by choice. If Cullun had been sober, he would have been quick to jump at such an offer. But now he hesitated. The rancher was in no condition to be hiring help, and Sonny didn't want to take advantage of him.

"How 'bout it, kid?" urged the rancher. "I'm needin' a good hand jist now."

Sonny wanted to save Cullun from these vultures if he could, for he saw that they were out to take him for all they could get.

"All right, sir," he said quietly. "I'll take the job, providin' that yuh take me to the ranch—now. I don't know where it is, yuh see."

"Why, shore, younker, I'll jist have——"

Webb Stewart was coming down the bar to round up his prey. Sonny noticed that one of his spurs, the leathers of which were ornately engraved, was loose and dragging. The foreman's face was livid with anger, and the look he gave the outlaw was murderous.

"Joe Cullun is drinkin' with us, sawed-off—do yuh savvy?" he rasped. "Come on, Joe; I've jist ordered another drink!"

Forgetting all about wanting to hire a waddy for the Rafter T, Cullun staggered along with Stewart, and Sonny Tabor, seeing that it was no use to try to save the rancher from these leeches—and from himself—walked on out of the War Dance to where his pinto stood waiting.

"We might as well be hittin' the trail, Paint," he sighed as he swung aboard. "I don't reckon I'll ever see that hombre Cullun again."

But he was destined to see him soon and under different and grimmer circumstances.

CHAPTER II.

OUTJUMPIN' THE LAW.

SONNY was a drifter, and usually he was drifting just a little ahead of the law. No matter which trail he took, the shadow of the hangman's noose seemed to lie across it. Death lurked behind every mesquite clump. Every peace officer in the Territory had his description, with orders to shoot—to kill.

Since his earliest teens, he had been a fugitive. Most young waddies would really have gone to the bad, but Sonny's soul was still unwarped. And he could still smile.

He and Paint, his wiry little

spotted cayuse, were now following a dim trail that led westward toward the saw-toothed range of lava mountains that stood, like blue-brown sentinels, against the sky line. It was a rough, broken country, baking now with midsummer heat.

Sonny found himself chuckling in spite of his disappointment. What a queer twist! He needed a job so badly, and he'd been offered one by an hombre too drunk to know what he was talking about.

"He'd better watch himself, though," the outlaw muttered. "I didn't much like the looks of those friends of his."

It had been an uneventful week for Sonny. He'd shaken off a posse up in Yavapai County, had circled far to the east and south again without hearing so much as the bark of a gun. Sonny was glad of a breathing spell. Perhaps a few peaceful weeks lay ahead of him.

"Maybe there'll come a time, Paint," he said wistfully, "when we won't be on the dodge."

Toward noon he found himself on a flat and barren table-land where the mesquites were shrunken and far apart. There was no cover of any kind; not even a saguaro relieved the lifeless monotony of the level plain. Directly ahead was a stony ridge covered with spidery ocotillo and clumps of pear.

Sonny was within perhaps a quarter of a mile of this rocky outcropping when he saw two riders pop into view from behind it. One of them held a Winchester across his saddle.

Officers! Sonny's instincts were almost supernaturally acute; they were like a hunted animal's. His years of outlawry had taught him much; he could spot an officer of the law almost as far as he could see him, and he had learned to make quick decisions. Most probably these men were Arizona Rangers.

No men were more dangerous. The Ranger organization, policing, with only a handful of men, an area larger than all of New England, was efficient, deadly to outlaws. Sonny had learned that. The Rangers were fighters, men who usually got their man.

The outlaw's brain was fast-functioning. In a glance he sized up the situation, and he instantly decided to bluff it out. If he turned Paint now for a run—well, the pinto was speedy, but .30-30 slugs were speedier! Besides, there was a chance that these Rangers wouldn't recognize him. More than one officer who knew Sonny's description by heart had been deceived by Sonny himself. So he rode straight ahead, neither speeding up nor slowing down.

"Steady, Paint, and keep yore shoes on," he whispered. "We might have to do our stuff."

The Rangers had seen Sonny and had halted, right in the trail. The one with the rifle had lowered it, and the other officer was rolling a cigarette. The outlaw breathed a little easier. They were waiting to speak to him, but they had no inkling of who he was; if they had, they wouldn't be sitting so carelessly in their saddles.

Pulling the brim of his Stetson a little farther down, as if to shade his eyes from the glare of the sun, Sonny neared the crucial moment. He was nearly alongside now, and he noticed that one of the riders was very tall and lean, the other being short and heavy-set. The two sunburned faces were strangely alike; they had the same gray and level eyes, the same hard and muscular jaws.

"Hold on, kid!" snapped the taller of the two. "We're Rangers."

Sonny pulled up obligingly, very quickly indeed, for he didn't want to get any closer to this pair!

"Yes, sir," he said swiftly.

His pulses were racing, and he knew that Paint, too, was on pins and needles. The intelligent little cayuse could scent the law as unerringly as *he* could, and he could feel the pinto's muscles quivering. One word, a touch, would send Paint away like a dust devil!

"Yuh live yereabouts?" the stumpy Ranger demanded.

"Across the range," the outlaw replied briefly.

"Know an hombre named Webb Stewart?" the taller officer clipped.

Sonny's heart began beating at a more normal pace. "Can't say I do," he said. "Sorry."

He wanted to ride on by, but it wouldn't do to appear too anxious. He saw the tall Ranger consulting a paper.

"Kin yuh tell us whar the Gallows Ranch is then?" he growled. "We understand thet Stewart is employed thar."

"I'm afraid I can't help yuh there, either," the outlaw drawled, and deeming that no more would be required of him he urged Paint forward.

"Wait a minute, kid!" flared up the pudgy officer, and even as he spoke his voice seemed to catch and hang fire. There was an amazed gasp in it. "Hold on, you! By gollies, yo're——"

"It's—it's Tabor!" yelped the tall Ranger.

The lean officer's hand sped toward the holstered Colt at his hip. The short Ranger, who had the Winchester, started to lift it! It was all off now!

Bang! The thunder of a .45 went echoing across the flats.

The quick, stabbing flash of flame had leaped from the muzzle of one of Sonny Tabor's six-guns. His draw had been too dazzlingly fast for the eyes to follow.

Sonny didn't fire at peace officers —to kill—and the slug only burned through the tall Ranger's fingers. It was enough, however, to upset the Ranger's draw, and it gave Sonny a few seconds of precious time. The short hombre with the rifle was slow, and his horse had reared at the sound of the shot and was now bucking violently.

Sonny Tabor's little pinto had changed, in one breath, from a docile little pony, into a whirlwind!

With a snort, Paint was gone! Its hoofs went into the air and all together—as if the bronc was about to land on a rattler—but when those hoofs came down again they were churning gravel!

"Let's—vamose!" gasped the outlaw, flattening himself over his saddle.

And the piebald proceeded to do that very thing. It ran in zigzags; it curvetted, it waltzed. Like a black-and-white jack rabbit it streaked over the ridge and beyond, whirling and dancing—and going like the wind!

Sonny always more than half suspected that Paint thoroughly enjoyed a race with death. It took more than obedience or fear to make a bronc cut up like that.

The two Rangers, when they recovered from their astonishment, opened a hot and blistering fire. Sonny didn't have much to fear from their six-guns, but the high-powered Winchester was a menace. He heard bullets whining about him like snapped fiddlestrings, saw up-

flung spouts of sand on all sides of him.

The law was giving chase, but Sonny didn't have many worries on that score. In Paint, he had a speedy, desert-wise cayuse that could show its heels to anything on legs.

Sonny sent his bronc tearing down an arroyo, up the opposite bank, and charging through a thicket of yucca. The bullets had ceased to come now; the officers were having all they could do to keep in sight.

"Good work, boy!" the outlaw muttered. "We're runnin' 'em dizzy."

Few knew the desert wilderness as Sonny knew it, for it had been his only home for many a smoky, dangerous year. And he knew all the tricky crafts of horsemanship, all the lore of the Apache. After an hour's dodging, he was beyond pursuit.

For the first time, he had opportunity to do a little thinking. It had been a close call, and he knew Ranger character well enough to be sure that the officers would not give up. There was still danger aplenty.

Sonny's one chance was to outguess his relentless pursuers, if possible. Naturally, they would expect him to put plenty of ground between him and the spot where he'd been so nearly captured. He decided to do the opposite, to circle right back again. In a wide arc, he would swing eastward once more.

Stewart! Wasn't that the name of that hombre in the War Dance? —the fugitive wondered. And it was him they were really lookin' for!

His curve to the east took about two hours, for he rode slowly and covered his trail as far as possible. At this he was as shrewd as an Indian. He was on the alert every moment, but saw no sign of the two Rangers.

The afternoon was waning, and as the day was now at its hottest he took it easy, giving Paint plenty of time to rest up from the grueling run.

He had just entered a little draw where the creosote bushes grew thick and high, when he saw something that caused him to stiffen in his saddle. Sick at heart, he pulled Paint to a halt. In all his life the outlaw had never experienced such a shock of horror, anger, and pity.

CHAPTER III.

MURDER!

SPRAWLED out in a little barren spot, face up, lay the lifeless body of Joe Cullun. An ugly wound gaped at his right temple, and gripped in his stiffening right hand was his Colt six-gun. Apparently it was suicide.

Sonny Tabor, however, had a hunch that it wasn't. He looked carefully around him, and after making sure that there was no one in sight, he dismounted to investigate.

The rancher had been dead, he judged, for something more than an hour. Ants had already discovered the body, and flies were buzzing and crawling over Cullun's face. The eyes were open and staring, the jaw had dropped and there was sand in the mouth, as if the dying man had struggled.

He examined Cullun's gun—a .44. It had been recently fired, a spent cartridge was under the hammer, and the muzzle smelled of powder. But it was a plant. The murderers had fired it—into the air, probably—and then had placed it in the dead man's hand.

Only a practiced eye would have

been able to pick up any sign, for all tracks had been carefully smoothed out. But Sonny found plenty to interest him. Three riders had been in on this murder. And he had a pretty good idea who those three men were.

He searched the body and found Cullun's wallet. It was empty except for a few receipts. The murderers had wanted to leave the impression that the drunken rancher had spent his money and then, in remorse, had killed himself.

Sonny made another discovery—an important one. About a dozen yards from the body, half covered with sand, was a silvery object, a spur that some one had lost. The outlaw recognized it instantly, for the leather was ornately engraved. It belonged to Webb Stewart, and Sonny pocketed it as evidence.

"It's too bad, Paint, that we had to find this, instead of the Rangers," the fugitive muttered, wondering what to do.

If he left Cullun where he lay, his body might never be found, or not until the birds and crawling things of the desert made identification impossible. That would be terrible for his family, and Sonny remembered Cullun speaking of a son. His murderers, too, would in that case never be punished.

"We've got to take the risk, Paint," he decided.

With some difficulty, for Cullun was a heavy man, the outlaw loaded Cullun onto Paint's back. He had no idea where Cullun's Rafter T was located, but he had an idea that Joe had been on his way home when he'd been overtaken by the killers.

Sonny surveyed the surrounding country, then he started due south, leading his burdened cayuse. In the distance, a line of trees marked a watercourse. It was as good a direction as any.

The sun was near its setting when Sonny Tabor came within sight of the scattered buildings of a ranch. The desert had cooled, the west was a blaze of crimson, and the sharply hewn blue peaks towered over the desert like petrified smoke.

Sonny didn't know if the ranch ahead was the Cullun spread or not. For all he knew, it might be the Gallows headquarters. He'd get a hot reception if it was! However, he thought he was at the right place; the few head of stock he'd been seeing had borne the Rafter T burn.

Three waddies were at work in one of the corrals near the house, and he saw them stop and stare. One of them shouted, and a fourth man—a young hombre not more than sixteen—came running from one of the sheds.

"This is where he lived, all right," Sonny thought, and although he knew none of these people, he felt an ache of sympathy for them.

"If that's my dad," the young ranny cried, running ahead of the others, "I wish yuh hadn't brought him home in that shape." He was a slim youth with tired-looking eyes. "I don't want mother to see——"

Sonny understood. The kid thought his father was only drunk. That explained the note of anger in his voice, the flush on his thin cheeks.

"It's not what yuh think, amigo," Sonny said, as young Cullun neared him. "I'm afraid it's worse. Yore father——"

For the first time, the kid got a look at his father. Sonny had dismounted—just in time to support young Cullun with his arm. The orphaned ranny had gone dead white, his knees had buckled, and he seemed at the point of collapse.

"Thunder!" ejaculated one of the Rafter T punchers, a very short and wide hombre with a red face. "Joe's been kilt, by gollies! Who done this? It's—it's awful!"

Another of the Cullun men, a bald-headed man of fifty, very bow-legged and thin, helped Sonny unload the pitiful form of the slain rancher.

"We'd best take him into the shed yonder," he whispered. "Mrs. Cullun—well, we got to break it to her easy. Buck up, Jimmy, boy!" he told the stricken rancher's son.

They got the body into the shed, and then, after placing it on a pile of straw, the dammed-up torrent of questions broke loose. Jimmy Cullun alone didn't have anything to ask; he was too broken with grief.

Sonny told them what had taken place in the War Dance Saloon at the crossroads, and of what had happened since, omitting, of course, his brush with the Rangers. The men listened with excitement and gathering anger.

"The Gallows bunch, shore enough!" cried the old waddy, whose name was "Baldy" Gray. "Why, those low-down skunks!"

"Here's the spur that proves it," said the outlaw, passing his discovery to them to examine.

The other two cowhands were "Stumpy" and "Snipe." Sonny liked Stumpy's open, honest face, but he didn't care much for the other ranny. Snipe was a young hombre of about twenty-five, pimply-faced and with a weak, receding chin and watery little eyes.

"Dad sold some cattle the other day," explained young Cullun unsteadily, when he'd finally recovered from the shock a bit. "He should have had close to three thousand dollars on him. This is Stewart's work, all right!" he cried bitterly.

"Thar ain't no question about it," Stumpy blurted. "Well—fust thing—who's goin' to tell Mrs. Cullun?"

It would be a sad task, this breaking of the news, and although Sonny didn't shrink from it, he thought it best that Joe Cullun's wife hear the news from some one other than a stranger. Baldy Gray finally agreed to take the responsibility.

While the old ranny was in the house, Sonny talked with the others. Jimmy Cullun, who had recovered a little, thanked the outlaw for what he had done. Sonny liked the rancher's son and was sorry for him. But when Jimmy asked him if he would stay at the ranch he hesitated.

"We—we'll need yuh, if yuh'll take a job here at the Rafter," young Cullun pleaded. "I'll want somebody to help take keer of mom. I—I hardly know what to do. I don't even know yore name, but somehow——"

"It's—just call me Tabe," the outlaw said.

He saw that Snipe had been giving him a careful once over. There was a peculiar look on the ratty waddy's sharp face, an expression that he hardly liked.

Before Sonny had made up his mind, Baldy Gray came out of the house. He motioned for them to bring the body in. So lifting the murdered man gently they carried him across the gallery into the neat living room.

For a while, young Cullun was in the other room, comforting his mother. Baldy Gray, Stumpy, and the outlaw fixed up the body on a couch the best they could, then stood with their hats in their hands.

Snipe hadn't stayed; he'd gone off somewhere. Under the circum-

stances, Sonny thought this a little strange.

When the outlaw finally saw Jimmy's mother, he knew that he would stay—for a while, at least. This ranch was a danger spot for him; there was no telling how close those Rangers were, but he would accept the responsibility, come what may. He'd long ago lost his own mother, and he would do anything for this poor, stricken woman—anything that he could do.

"I'm goin' to ride to Piedras for the sheriff," Jimmy said grimly. "Mom, Tabe and the boys will stay here with yuh and sort of look out fer yuh. Yuh'll take the job, won't yuh, amigo?" he asked of Sonny.

"For a while," the outlaw reassured him.

He'd already given Cullun the spur—evidence that should hang Webb Stewart if justice was done.

Sonny was glad that *he* hadn't been asked to go for the sheriff. That would have complicated things.

Mrs. Cullun, a motherly woman with prematurely white hair, was bearing up bravely in her hour of grief. She took the outlaw's hand gratefully. More than ever now, Sonny was determined to help her—to see this out to the end.

"Thank you, Mr. Tabe," she said, trying to smile. "You're awfully good to us."

Sonny Tabor wondered what she would have said had she known who her protector really was.

CHAPTER IV.

AT THE SHERIFF'S OFFICE.

PIEDRAS, the county seat, was a straggling town of about two thousand, located in the high country and surrounded by magnificent mountains mantled with huge junipers and yellow pine. Although only a scant dozen miles from the desert, it was always cool there, and the air was laden with the spicy perfume of the forest.

At the lower end of the main street was the sheriff's office and jail—a small, but massive structure of solid stone. And here, at a little after seven in the evening, Sheriff Will Mays was entertaining professional guests—"Slim" Arden and "Tub" Cone of the Arizona Rangers. Mays, a stolid, heavy-set man in his fifties, was much excited and perturbed. His red face glistened with sweat.

"Well, if Tabor's in my district it's shore news to me!" he cried, pacing the floor back and forth in front of his shabby roll-top desk. "And I'm shore sorry to hear it. Are yuh shore——"

"Thar ain't no question but what it was him," growled Tub Cone, thoughtfully rubbing a round, cherubic cheek and frowning at a reward poster that was tacked on the office wall.

It carried the picture of Sonny Tabor, and "Wanted—Six Thousand Dollars Reward" upon it in huge black letters.

"We chased him fer miles," snorted Slim Arden in disgust. "Fired a couple dozen rounds at him, too, but shucks——"

"He give us the go-by," agreed Tub Cone mournfully. "Thet kid is tricky, believe me! And thet cayuse of his——"

"If yuh think it will do any good fer me to organize a posse and hunt fer him," groaned Sheriff Mays, "I'd be only too willin'——"

"No use, I'm afraid," Slim Arden shrugged. "This is a mighty big country, and the younker's too smart at coverin' his tracks. Only thing is to wait fer the breaks. We might be lucky enough to git a tip

as to whar to find him. Funny thing was, we wasn't expectin' to see Tabor, a-tall. We're in yore county after another man, sheriff."

"Hombre named Webb Stewart," added Ranger Cone. "Do yuh know him?"

Sheriff Mays blinked, then nodded in the affirmative. "I shore do," he said sharply. "He's the foreman at Gallows Ranch, down in the valley. A bad un, too, so I hear, though I've never been able to git anything on him."

"Well, *we* have," said the slimmer of the two Territorial officers, flipping his cigarette into the spittoon. "He's wanted for murder down Bisbee way. Who owns this yere Gallows spread? Stewart's plumb apt to git a gallows, all right, and it won't be the name of a ranch, either!"

"The Ballister brothers own it—Abe and Jake," the sheriff told them. "It's got a bad name. Some say it's a rustler nest. Not thet I have proof of thet, o' course," he added hastily and apologetically. "If I did, I'd have cleaned it out long ago."

"O' course yuh would've, sheriff," agreed Tub Cone, a trifle ironically.

The Rangers knew how easy-going some sheriffs were, and Mays seemed blinder than the average, although honest enough.

"Yuh'd better show us the way to the Ballister spread, if yuh have the time, sheriff," said Arden, "and we kin make the capture to-night."

"That'll be fine," said Mays, getting up and jamming on his black Stetson. "I'd better light the lamp yere and leave it lit. I'll jist—— Hold on, who's this?" he ejaculated, as hoofs beat up the street in front of the jail and stopped. "Some one to see me on business, looks like."

Boot heels clicked across the plank sidewalk, and the door was hurriedly swung open. In stepped a frail-looking young ranny whom Sheriff Mays recognized as Joe Cullun's son. The kid was pale, and his shoulders drooped a little.

"Howdy, Cullun! What kin I do fer yuh?" asked Mays kindly. "Anything wrong?"

"Yes, there is," Jimmy Cullun panted, his eyes somber and tragic.

"Yuh kin speak freely afore these men, Cullun," the sheriff told him. "They're Rangers."

"Can we help, son?" Slim Arden encouraged, seeing that no ordinary business had brought Cullun there that night.

But none of the three officers were prepared for what Cullun had to tell them.

"My father's been murdered," he blurted out. "He was robbed—and killed—this afternoon."

Mays slumped back into his chair, and the two Rangers stiffened. The sheriff had been well acquainted with the Rafter T owner, and the news stunned him for a moment.

"Tell me about it," he gasped finally. "Have yuh got any idea who——"

"Yes!" cried Jimmy Cullun, his dark eyes flashing with up-bursting anger. "It was Webb Stewart and his pards. This spur was found jist a little ways from the body, and dad was seen drinkin' with the bunch at the War Dance Saloon earlier in the day."

While Mays examined the spur, Cullun went on to tell of what he knew about his father's murder. The two Rangers had jumped from their chairs and exchanged glances when Stewart's name had been mentioned. Now they loosened their six-guns in their holsters and made ready for rapid travel.

"Who did yuh say found yore dad's body?" Mays asked the Rafter T youngster. "A man named Tabe, eh?" He shrugged when Jimmy repeated the name. "Prob'ly jist a saddle tramp. I'll talk to him, o' course. Well, boys," he said, turning to the Rangers, "we'd better hurry to the Gallows spread. Yuh ready?"

But Jimmy Cullun was standing and staring as if spellbound at a poster over the sheriff's desk. By the light of the newly lighted lamp he could see the picture there quite plainly and read every word of what was written beneath. The two Rangers were looking at Cullun curiously.

"What's the matter, kid? Ever see that hombre before?" Slim Arden asked him quickly.

Cullun moistened his lips and gulped. He recognized the picture. It was Tabe. His eyes were dilated and a catch had come to his throat.

"Thet's Tabor, the most wanted killer in the Southwest," Arden barked. "Have yuh seen him?"

The ranch kid was torn by conflicting emotions, by his belief in "Tabe's" sincerity and by his respect for the law. He'd always been taught to believe the worst of gunmen who were beyond the pale. He'd heard of Tabor. Nearly every one in Arizona had heard that name and dreaded it.

Was it possible that Sonny Tabor had killed his father and lied? That thought flashed through his mind like a lightning bolt.

The officers were waiting for his answer. He was conscious of the deepening suspicion in their eyes. He'd have to make up his mind.

He lied like the gentleman that he was. In spite of "Tabe's" reputation, he believed in him!

"No, I ain't seen that hombre before," he said.

Outside, the stars were twinkling in the blue velvet sky. The lamplight from the saloons and stores made yellow puddles on the twisting street of Piedras. They crossed the walk to their horses. Cullun's roan cayuse was lathered, but in fair shape. He was about to mount when the sheriff touched his shoulder.

"This hombre, Tabe, thet yuh spoke of," he grunted, "what was he like? Tabor has been seen hereabouts, and it's just struck me thet Tabe might——"

Cullun wasn't a liar as a general thing, and he had to think fast.

"Tabe's a tall ranny 'bout forty years old," he said impulsively.

"Well, thet's settled then," snorted Mays, as he and the Rangers swung aboard their broncs. "Let's git agoin'."

They cantered on out of Piedras together, with Cullun riding alongside the sheriff and with the two Rangers knee to knee behind them. The Rafter T ranny had already decided what to do. In spite of all that he had heard, he didn't believe that Sonny Tabor was guilty of anything except being what he was —a hunted man. He would have to be warned.

Sonny, of course, would expect the law to ride direct to Gallows Ranch. That was what the law *was* doing. But Jimmy Cullun knew that the outlaw should be warned. He'd have to be told about the Rangers.

There was a crossroads a few miles below Piedras. There two trails forked to meander across the valley where both the Rafter T and the Gallows spreads were located. One of them went close to the ranch of the Ballister brothers, and the other passed within a couple of

miles of the Cullun home. When they reached it, Jimmy Cullun halted.

"I'll ride on over to the Rafter T, sheriff, so's to be with my mother," he explained quickly.

"'*Sta bueno*, son," assented the Piedras officer hastily. "Thar might be gun play, anyhow, whar we're go-in', and it wouldn't be best fer yuh to come along."

"Adios, younker!" Ranger Arden agreed. "We'll prob'ly call at yore ranch later."

It was a longer way around to the Rafter T than to the Gallows Ranch, and young Cullun knew that if he was to warn Sonny Tabor he would have to hurry. Roweling his bronc as soon as he was out of the officers' sight, he sent his weary roan over the desert trail at top speed.

The law wouldn't get its hands on Sonny if he could help it!

CHAPTER V.

SNIPE.

THE ratty-faced Rafter T waddy called "Snipe"—and no one knew his other name—had left the Cullun ranch as soon as he could sneak away. He had long been secretly in cahoots with the Ballister bunch at Gallows Ranch, and now he had important news for the men who lived there. Snipe was shrewd in an evil way. He took a wide swing around country and reached the ranch about an hour after nightfall.

The ranch house—a whitewashed frame building set deep in a grove of paloverde trees, would have struck any one as being somehow disreputable and sinister. Some of the windows had been broken out and patched up with gunny sacks, the chimney was a ruin, the porch a teetering wreck. Empty liquor bottles and other trash littered the yard. The corrals and outbuildings, however, were in better shape.

A high moon was riding the sky, casting queer shadows and making the silver-pale paloverde trees ghost-like and weird. A night-bird chirped mournfully as Snipe halted outside the house.

He knocked in a peculiar way and was readily admitted. He walked into a dirty and disordered room which served the Gallows crew both for eating and sleeping quarters. It smelled sourly of cheap liquor.

Red Hunt was sprawled on one of the bunks, snoring loudly. He was evidently sleeping off the effects of too many drinks, but now he awoke. Bill Prim was washing out a shirt in a rusty dish pan on the stove, while Webb Stewart was diligently swabbing out the barrels of one of his Colt six-guns. With the trio was the fourth hombre employed by the outfit—a squinting, sullen-featured gunman named McMurk.

They all stared at Snipe, and then Stewart grinned.

"Howdy, Snipe," he greeted. "I'll bet I know why yo're here. Somethin' happened to yore boss at the Rafter T."

The weasel from the Rafter T nodded unsmilingly. "Yo're right somethin' did," he said in a low voice. "And yuh slipped up a little, Stewart. One of yore spurs was found near the body. Jimmy went to Piedras fer the sheriff."

The Gallows foreman looked down at his boots and swore softly. "I was wonderin' whar I'd dropped thet," he growled. "Well, it'll take more than jist thet to convict, and if I kin frame an alibi——"

"But yuh cain't, Webb," Snipe chuckled mirthlessly. "Old Joe was picked up by a younker who seen

you and the boys with Cullun at the War Dance."

"Thet kid?" Stewart snarled wolfishly. "Well, I'll be—— Wait, and I'll give the low-down to Abe and Jake."

He went into the adjoining room and reappeared with the owners of the Gallows spread, the two Ballister brothers. Abe, the elder, was a loose-jointed hombre in his middle forties. He was slovenly dressed, and his bloated, dissipated face was covered with a scrubby brown growth of whiskers. Jake resembled him, except that he was younger, and fat, and if possible his eyes were even more evil and cruel.

Snipe and the six Gallows hombres gathered about the greasy table for a conference. The murky light of the smoky tin lamp fell on their bleak faces, cast distorted shadows on the warped walls.

For the benefit of the Ballisters, Snipe repeated what he had told Stewart. The Rafter T traitor also told them something else, something that filled all five with incredulous amazement.

"I know who thet kid is," he said with a snaggly grin. "I reco'nized him by the pictures on the reward posters. He's Sonny Tabor!"

Red Hunt and Bill Prim exchanged astonished glances. Webb Stewart jumped to his feet, mouth agape.

"Yuh mean thet baby-faced younker thet was in the War Dance?" he ejaculated. "Why, he couldn't be!"

"I'm dead shore of it," Snipe said.

"And he's at the Rafter T now?" rumbled McMurk. "If I remember right, thar's a big reward fer him, dead or alive. We could——"

"Sheriff Mays will be yere any time now," Snipe reminded them. "We've got to hatch up somethin' quick. He'll arrest yuh, Stewart, fer murder. And as fer me—well, I got to git back to the Rafter T, afore I'm suspicioned. If yuh figger out a way to collect on Tabor's scalp, I'm in on it."

His mission performed, Snipe took leave of the Gallows bunch. They heard him mount and gallop away.

"Well, thet's thet!" grunted Jake Ballister. "What are we goin' to do? Looks like yuh've got the Gallows in bad with the law, Webb. I was hopin' thet this spread could keep its nose clean. We're makin' good dinero the way it is."

Webb Stewart lighted a cigarette. "They can't prove much on me, and not a thing on the rest of you," he said. "When the sheriff comes, I'll go to Piedras with him, and then yuh——"

Abe Ballister had been thinking hard, gnawing at his filthy finger nails and wrinkling his low forehead. Now he smote the table with his hairy fist.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed. "Mays is easy-goin'. We'll jist make a bargain with him."

"What do yuh mean, chief?" asked Prim.

"The law wants Tabor, has wanted him bad fer years," explained the elder Ballister. "We'll lay our cards on the table when the sheriff comes. We'll tell him we'll trade Tabor fer Stewart. If he'll kind o' drop things agin' Stewart we'll tell him whar this Tabor kid is. He'll prob'ly jump at it."

"Thet's a plumb good idea, and it'll let us in fer some o' thet reward money, too," his brother approved. "It'll——"

He broke off. Saddle leather had squeaked outside, and they heard the thump of boots across the porch. The gang looked at each other in wonderment. It sounded like more

than one man, and they'd hardly expected Mays, who usually worked alone, to bring any one with him.

And the surprise they got was unpleasant. Rangers! Men they'd neither expected nor wanted. But it was too late to do anything about it now. Abe and Jake Ballister had opened the door, pretending a pleased cordiality they did not feel.

"Well, well, sheriff," Abe piped in assumed astonishment. "What brings you here? This is quite a big——"

"Evenin'," said the Piedras officer coldly, his glance going past the two falsely smiling Ballisters and falling grimly upon Webb Stewart. "We're yere on business, Abe. These men are Arizona Rangers."

"Yuh don't say!" Abe ejaculated. He and his men had already guessed that. The fact that they were strangers in the county and with Sheriff Mays was pretty good evidence of it, even though they wore no badges.

"Yo're under arrest, Stewart!" barked the sheriff, stepping quickly up to the sneering and unresisting foreman and extending a pair of handcuffs.

"Yuh needn't put them things on me." Stewart shrugged. "I'll come quietly, bein' as I've got nothin' on my conscience. What's the charges?"

"The murder of Joe Cullun!" Mays snapped.

Stewart smiled thinly, for he'd expected that. His grimace faded, however, when Ranger Slim Arden spoke *his* piece.

"And for thet Bisbee murder, too, Stewart!" The Territorial officer smiled icily.

"Yes, Stewart," said Ranger Cone. "Thar's a nice hangman's hackamore waitin' fer yuh over thar. If yuh'll excuse me, I'll jist relieve yuh of these smoke poles. Yuh won't be needin' 'em."

This was a new turn of affairs! Stewart's sardonic face had lost its impudence. He'd been caught up with; that Bisbee affair was one he *couldn't* beat, for there had been witnesses. A little dazed, he submitted to being disarmed, and was promptly handcuffed.

"Now jist a minute, law dawgs," put in Abe Ballister. "I've got somethin' to say—an offer to make, so to speak."

The two Rangers looked hard at him, and there was nothing favorable in their stare.

"My foreman is very valuable to this spread," Abe began.

"If I was you, hombre, I wouldn't admit it," Ranger Arden remarked.

"And if yuh'll go easy with him," wheedled Ballister, "I'll put yuh next to a *real* capture, one thet will make yuh the most famous officers in Arizony. I'll tell yuh whar to put yore hands on Sonny Tabor! I know whar he is, right this minute!"

The two Rangers stiffened at this piece of information, and the sheriff gasped. The news seemed too good to be true.

Seeing the impression that he'd made, Abe Ballister continued triumphantly:

"He's at the Rafter T, and if there was a murder committed thar, it was him thet done it—yuh know his reputation. I'm tellin' yuh this, 'cause I know yuh'll make it easy on my foreman in return fer the info', and I——"

"We'll soon see if yore story's true, Ballister," said Slim Arden crisply. "We're headed thar right now, and we're takin' Stewart with us. But git this straight, hombre, and git it pronto—the Rangers make no bargains with nobody!"

"We're not allowed to trade one

criminal fer another, even fer one of Tabor's caliber," chimed in Tub Cone. "Come along, Stewart."

Almost before the disgruntled Gallows rannies realized it, the three officers had taken their prisoner out of the house and had put him on the back of a cayuse. The Rangers weren't fooling, either! With Stewart riding between them they cantered away, with Sheriff Mays bringing up the rear, toward the Cullun ranch.

"Thunderation!" snarled Jake Ballister, when he'd recovered his voice. "Stewart knows too much about us and our business. We cain't let the law dawgs git him! What'll we do, Abe?"

The other Ballister brother helped himself to whisky before replying. His bloated face was purple with rage, and in his piggish eyes was a glitter of decision.

"We'll see thet Webb Stewart ain't jailed!" he rasped. "Now yere," he said, lowering his voice and seating himself at the table, "is how we'll work it."

Carefully he outlined his plan—a scheme which, if successful, would cheat the hangman's noose of Webb Stewart and ignite the blaze of smoking murder.

CHAPTER VI.

ANOTHER CAPTURE.

WHEN Mrs. Cullun, worn out by her grief, had fallen asleep, Sonny and the two Rafter T rannies went out on the gallery to sit in the moonlight. They talked in lowered voices, and already a bond of friendship had sprung up between Tabe and Stumpy and Baldy Gray.

Snipe had been missing throughout the evening, and his absence had brought forth some caustic comments from Baldy and Stumpy. Judging from what he heard, Sonny didn't think Snipe was very popular with the two. Nor was he with Sonny, although the outlaw couldn't have told exactly why.

"Tabe, hadn't yuh better let us help yuh put up yore hoss?" old Baldy asked curiously. "Thet little cayuse of yores has been standin' out thar beside the shed all this time. So much has happened thet I hadn't thought of the critter afore."

Sonny had thought of Paint! But he'd left the pinto there, saddled and ready, for a purpose.

He expected the sheriff from Piedras to show up at the Rafter T that night and at the first sign of his coming, Sonny planned to high-tail it, to slip quietly away and "hit for the tall tules."

He'd promised to stay at the Rafter T, promised Jimmy to remain there with his mother until his return, but the outlaw didn't intend to stay there one moment after that. There was no use of his throwing his life away. He realized that he'd been foolhardy to remain as long as he had.

"I'll take care of Paint a little later, amigos," he drawled.

For some reason, the outlaw had a feeling of impending disaster. Something, he felt, was going to happen. It was very still, there on the moon-drenched gallery, and the vast desert and mountain country, stretching away on every side, seemed to be slumbering peacefully under the stars. But Sonny's nerves were like taut wires. Hovering over the Rafter T were the black wings of death.

"Listen, boys, I believe thet's the law a-comin' now!" Stumpy cried, after they had been on the porch a few minutes. "No, thet's queer. Sounds like only one bronc. Jimmy

wouldn't be comin' yere without the sheriff."

"I'll go meet him," Sonny said quickly, and he jumped from the porch and hurried toward the rutted wagon road that led around the larger of the two corrals. In case of emergency Paint wouldn't be far from there.

He saw, however, that it was Jimmy Cullun and that he was really alone. That was a relief, anyhow. He wouldn't have to duck the law. At least, not yet.

Cullun saw him and pulled in his cayuse, about a hundred yards from the house. Sonny could see, even by moonlight, that the kid's cayuse had been ridden out. The animal was lathered, winded, and lame.

The outlaw was hardly prepared, however, for Cullun's words; they went through him like a knife.

"The sheriff and two Rangers are at the Gallows spread—prob'ly on their way yere by this time," the little ranny said as he slid from his saddle. "My hoss petered out on me, or I'd have been yere sooner, so's to warn yuh, Sonny Tabor."

"Yuh know me then?" Sonny said in a low voice.

"Yes."

"And do they—the law, I mean?"

There was a catch in Jimmy Cullun's voice. "No. I lied. They got no idea who yuh really are, but they'll be yere any time, and yuh'd —yuh'd better vamose, amigo."

Sonny felt an ache at his heart. Once again, it was the dodge, the hungry, smoky trail for him and Paint. He gripped Cullun's hand and felt the warm pressure of the kid's fingers in return.

"Thanks, *compadre*," he said in a whisper. "I'll go now. Yore mother's feelin' better, and yuh'd better go up to the house and see how she's gettin' on. Hope everything turns out *bueno*. Adios!"

Turning from his new-made friend, Sonny went toward the shed behind which Paint waited. He went almost at a run, for he knew now that his hunch was right—danger was in the offing. Instinct warned him.

But it didn't tell him that things were going to happen quite so soon! Halfway from the corral to the shed he whistled softly—a signal that Paint well understood. But there was no response, not even when he repeated it more loudly.

Had the pinto strayed? The outlaw could hardly think that. He increased his pace to a spriut. In another moment, he would be around the corner of the sagging little building.

Paint was gone! The fugitive paused in bewilderment. His spotty cayuse was as obedient and faithful as a pet dog. He hadn't tethered it; he'd never needed to. But there was nothing there but shadow and patches of moonlight that filtered through the rustling branches of the cottonwoods and paloverdes that edged the little clearing by the river.

"Don't make a move, Tabor!" commanded a thin voice. "Not one move, or I'll blast a hole through yuh. Yo're covered."

Sonny didn't see Snipe at first, even after he had spoken, for the treacherous little weasel had been pressed close against the side of the tool shed. Now, however, he stepped out into a little oblong of moonglow, and the outlaw could see him distinctly enough. A six-gun was in his hand, leveled at Sonny from a distance of a scant three yards.

Snipe was grinning with triumph and eagerness; Sonny could see the excited trembling of his receding

chin, the ugly shine of his slitted eyes.

"I decided to collect thet six thousand reward, myself, baby-face," mocked the double-crossing ranny. "Didn't know I'd be so lucky. Yo're not as pizen dangerous as yo're cracked up to be, Tabor, are yuh?" he sneered. "Don't move now," he warned again. "I kin see both yore hands, and I'd sooner kill yuh than not, bein' as the reward is 'dead or alive.'"

Sonny had been in too many desperate situations to be anything but cool in this one. He sized up the man in an instant. Snipe had the drop, yes. But *had* he? Sonny Tabor was the fastest man in the Southwest with a pair of six-guns, and he could feel their comforting weight cuddled against his thighs.

"I reckon I sort o' had yuh figured out right, Snipe," Sonny said calmly.

He wanted to get Snipe talking; that was his only chance now. If he could distract the pimply traitor only for the fraction of a second——

"Too smart fer yuh, wasn't I, Tabor?" Snipe jeered, rising to the bait. "I've been to the Gallows Ranch on some business regardin' you, and on the way back I seen yore bronc yere. Says, I, why not git Tabor by my lonesome. And thet's what I've done. I pulled yore bronc away from yere—had quite a job doin' it—and then I——"

Sonny could see that Snipe intended to kill him. And he beat Snipe to it. He shot Snipe and sent him dying into the dust.

Both of Sonny Tabor's Colts flashed and roared. His double draw had been so lightning fast that the Rafter T traitor was hit before his finger could tighten on the trigger. Snipe probably never knew what had happened. Two bullets crashed through his chest, and it was over.

Once again Sonny Tabor had killed, and his only regret was that it had been necessary. Snipe had brought it on himself.

Holstering his smoking guns, he started to run toward the adjacent line of paloverde trees, thinking that Snipe had perhaps hidden Paint there. But Sonny didn't get far. As he crossed a patch of moonlight he heard the clicking of Winchester levers.

"Hands up, Tabor!" chorused voices of authority, and Sonny saw that he was trapped.

On his left was the taller of the two Rangers who had attempted to arrest him earlier that day, and on his right he saw two other looming, mounted figures, saw the glint of starlight on the steel of leveled guns.

This time the outlaw had no recourse. He surrendered.

CHAPTER VII.

DEATH TRAIL TO PIEDRAS.

AT dawn a grim little party was loping along the narrow road that wound and twisted its way through the mountains to Piedras. The sun was not yet up, and there was still a haze of fine mist, more ghostly than smoke, swirling through the dark canyons. The pine trees dripped moisture, and the only sounds were the creaking of saddles and the slow and rhythmic beat of hoofs.

There were five in the group of early riders—three officers and two prisoners, bound for the jail at Piedras, still four or five miles away.

Webb Stewart, handcuffed and scowling, was astride a buckskin cayuse and next to him rode Sonny Tabor, his hands bound behind him with lariat rope. He wasn't riding

Paint, but was aboard an ungainly *bayo coyote* borrowed from the Rafter T.

Rangers Cone and Arden rode directly behind the two, their rifles at carry, and Sheriff Mays brought up the rear. It was a triumphant day indeed, it seemed, for the law.

The officers were in high spirits, as was natural after such a success. They'd had a lucky break, especially, in capturing Sonny Tabor, for they had galloped up to the Rafter T headquarters just at the right moment. It couldn't have worked out better for them.

"Man, but I'm hungry," Ranger Tub Cone chortled. "The first thing we'll do when we hit Piedras is eat! How would a platter o' hot fried mush and bacon look to yuh, Slim?"

"Ham and eggs fer mine," said Arden.

Sonny was naturally of a hopeful and cheerful disposition, and even now he didn't allow his misfortunes to overwhelm him. He'd been in many a tight situation before. Death had no terrors for him; he'd faced it too many times.

Webb Stewart was in a seething fury. The rope was ahead of him, and he knew it. His thin, hawkish face was a set white mask, his eyes held the shadow of fear and hate. He blamed Sonny for the jam he was in, and kept taunting and cursing him.

"They got you, too, and I'm glad of *thet* anyway!" he snarled venomously. "It's what yuh git, yuh baby-faced sneak! I got a chance to beat my rap, kid, but yuh'll hang, Tabor, as shore as skunks smell!"

Sonny didn't waste breath in replying to the Gallows foreman. He kept his eyes on the glorious scenery through which they were passing—vivid red and yellow cliffs, green forest, and the sky so tenderly blue overhead. Birds were awakening and twittering in the pines, and once a little white-tail deer went scuttling through the brush ahead of them and vanished in a trembling flash.

The young outlaw felt a tugging bond between himself and that scampering animal; in their veins was the same wild surge of pulsating life, the same love of freedom.

Another mile would take them to the top of the pass, to the summit where the trail curved downward again into Piedras.

Suddenly the outlaw's hair-trigger nerves tingled. In that thick brush alongside the road twenty yards ahead——

"Look out, every one!" he yelled, then dropped as low as he could over his saddle pommel.

Br-r-r-rang! Bang-bang! Red-orange powder flame flashed from the thicket as five masked riders came charging from their place of deadly ambush. Smoke billowed upward and was whipped into blue streamers by the wind.

Things happened fast then. Slim Arden held the lead rope of Sonny's bronc and the outlaw felt it tighten as the Ranger's cayuse began to rear and plunge. There was a cry from Tub Cone, a loud oath from the amazed sheriff. Sonny saw Stewart's face light up with unholy joy and triumph. It was a rescue!

The five dry-gulchers worked with smooth precision, and got their job done quickly and well. Before the officers could fire more than an ineffectual shot or two in return, the masked killers had seized Stewart's horse by the bridle and had galloped into the depths of the forest, leaving both Ranger Cone and Sheriff Mays sprawled out on the trail.

"Good-by, Tabor—my regards to

the hangman!" Webb Stewart had shouted back.

Slim Arden, the only officer not hit by the fusillade, was in a disagreeable spot. He couldn't chase the attackers without losing his remaining prisoner. Nor did he want to desert Mays and his Ranger pard.

"The stinkaroos! The low-down sneaks!" he panted. "Well, Tabor, I'm makin' shore of *you*, anyhow!"

Dismounting, he quickly tethered Sonny's mount to a pine alongside the trail. Then he ran over to where Tub Cone and the sheriff lay.

Mays was not badly hurt, and he was already struggling to his feet. A wound high in the shoulder had bowled him from his horse, and the fall had momentarily stunned him.

"I—I'm all right, I reckon," he gasped, as Arden helped him to his feet. "It was the Ballister bunch from Gallows Ranch! I'm dead shore of it, but as they was masked, we wouldn't be able to prove it in court in a hundred years! The skunks shore——"

"Tub Cone is dead!" cried Arden in a choked voice. "They got him right through the head!"

CHAPTER VIII.

RESTLESS DAYS.

SONNY TABOR was jailed immediately upon reaching the county seat, and was placed in charge of a Mexican deputy named Pedro who was to act as his jailer. The few days that followed were busy days indeed for the sheriff and Ranger Arden, but restless, weary ones for the outlaw.

The jail consisted of a single cell that was connected to Mays's office by means of a row of stout iron rods and a barred door. It was of stone, except for the floor, which was of hard-packed adobe, nearly as hard. The only window, also barred, was no more than a foot square and afforded a view of the dreary back alley.

Sonny was pretty lonely during those days, for Mays and Ranger Arden were working on the Cone murder case, and he saw little of them.

A change had come over the Ranger. He never smiled now, and his face had taken on a savage look. The outlaw could see that his pard's murder had upset him deeply.

Sonny could speak more Spanish than Pedro could English, but the swarthy jailer was rather grumpy and seldom had anything to say.

The outlaw did learn, however, that Mays and Arden hadn't been able to get any real proof as to the guilt of the Ballister men. They had suspicions aplenty, but that wasn't sufficient to hang them. There weren't even enough grounds for an arrest.

"They not even find no trace of Stewart," Pedro told Sonny. "He ees hiding some place. Mays, he theenk the Ballisters know where he ees, all right. They are watching that place."

On the third day Sonny was gladdened by a visit from Jimmy Cullun, Stumpy, and Baldy Gray. They stood beyond the bars, under the suspicious eyes of Pedro, and talked with him for more than an hour.

"We'd 'a' come sooner, Sonny," apologized Cullun, "but there was the funeral—and mom to think about. Is thar anything we kin do fer yuh, anything they'd let us bring to yuh?"

"It's a dirty shame, Sonny," said Baldy, when the outlaw smilingly shook his head. "Yuh wouldn't be

in this fix, if yuh hadn't tried to help us at the Rafter T."

"Jist say the word, pard, and we'll do what we kin to git yuh out of yere!" Stumpy whispered hoarsely, his jaw outthrust indignantly.

Sonny was touched at this unexpected display of friendship and loyalty. But, of course, he couldn't get them into trouble by letting them do anything rash; that would mean stiff prison sentences for them all.

"Is Paint all right? Yo're takin' care of him?" he asked anxiously.

"Fit as a fiddle, Sonny!" Stumpy grinned, stuffing his leathery cheek with cut-plug tobacco. "Yes, sir. I've been takin' care o' thet pinto my own self. He's kind o' lonesome, though, and down in the dumps, Paint is."

Sonny lowered his voice. "Would yuh mind havin' Paint in town tomorrow night 'bout midnight? Would yuh tie him across the street, a block down?"

"Why, shore, Sonny! What have yuh got up yore sleeve? If we can help in any other way——"

The bullet dimple deepened in Sonny's cheek. But he would tell them nothing more. That would make them accomplices. If he was to make a jail break, he wanted to do it all by himself.

"Adios, amigos, and watch out for the Ballister bunch," he said, when Pedro told the visitors it was time for them to go.

The next day, Sonny learned that Sheriff Mays's wound was giving him trouble and that he'd been forced to take to his bed at his home. The Ranger was carrying on alone now, and from what Sonny learned from Pedro, his task was hopeless, so far as pinning anything on the Gallows men was concerned.

"I theenk Ranger 'bout ready geeve up," growled the swarthy deputy that evening. "In day or two, he and me goin' take you to Tucson. They hang you there, *muchacho*."

"Well, that's pleasant news," the outlaw drawled.

It was high time that he made his break for liberty! He had more than personal reasons, too, for wanting to get away. The law, so far, had failed to touch the Gallows crowd of gunnies, and Sonny thought it was time that *he* took a hand, if only for the sakes of Jimmy and Mrs. Cullun. They wouldn't be safe as long as that murder gang was loose.

"To-night's the night," he muttered, as the midnight hour approached.

There was no water in his cell, and whenever he wanted a drink he had to tell Pedro, who passed a tin cup through the bars. For some time now, he had been watching and studying the Mex deputy's method of performing this service. Now the time was ripe.

It grew quiet in the street outside, and Pedro drowsed in his easy-chair at the sheriff's desk. Through his cell window Sonny could see a friendly moon and a sprinkling of brilliant stars.

"*Quiero agua*, Pedro!" the outlaw asked sharply.

The deputy grumbled something in his native tongue, went to the water bucket and got a cupful of the tepid fluid. Blinking sleepily, he walked up to the bars with it, slopping it over the floor as he went.

There was just room for him to pass it between the iron rods of the cell, and he did it with his right hand—his gun hand—which was

probably the most serious mistake he could have made.

Instead of taking the cup, Sonny took Pedro's wrist, and in a grip of steel. The jailer yelled shrilly and tried to jerk free, but it was no use. The outlaw was very strong. One tremendous yank brought Pedro's arm inside the cell clear to the shoulder.

"*Por que*——"

"Yore belt buckle—yuh can reach it with yore other hand! Unfasten it!" ordered the outlaw in rapid Spanish.

"I weel not do!" panted the deputy.

But he changed his mind when Sonny gave his arm another mighty twist. With sweat dripping from his brown face, he fumbled at his belt. He unfastened the buckle and the belt, cartridges and gun holster with it, thudded to the floor at the bottom of the bars within Sonny's reach.

"Now I'm goin' to turn yuh loose, grab that gun, and cover yuh!" Sonny warned crisply. "Take a jump backward, and then stand still!"

"I weel do!" wailed the sweating Pedro.

Then Sonny got the .45, and ordered Pedro to open the door with his key. The Mexican obeyed—exceedingly pronto! Stepping out of his prison, the outlaw locked his ex-jailer in the cell in his stead.

"And now," Sonny thought, "if the boys have Paint waitin' for me like they promised——"

Opening the office door, he peered warily out into the street. It seemed deserted, and he slipped out, buckling Pedro's cartridge belt around his waist as he went.

He was still unable to see whether Paint was at the appointed place, or not, for a tree at the edge of the street down the block cast a dense shadow and there were no lights there. Another hundred yards, however, and he would know. Keeping close to the buildings, he strode rapidly toward his goal.

Just below the jail a side street entered the main thoroughfare of Piedras. Sonny had just started across this gloomy intersection when he almost collided with an hombre who was rounding the corner.

It was Ranger Slim Arden! The two men recognized each other on the instant.

And both acted on the instant! Sonny had holstered Pedro's gun, but it came from the leather like a flash. And at the same twinkling Arden drew. Both had the drop at a point-blank range.

Sonny heard a gasp from Arden, heard the click of his gun hammer in time with the click of his own. It was death, it seemed, for them both. Both were experts at gun play, and both had nerves of iron. They had sand in their craws, these two!

"Drop it, Slim!" said Sonny softly.

"You drop yores," came the Ranger's whistling breath, "or I'll let yuh have it."

"You can have first shot," said the outlaw pleasantly. "Slim, I'm goin' to Gallows Ranch. Want to go along?"

Slim's lanky body visibly relaxed, but his gun was still leveled at Sonny's belt line. The outlaw saw a change come into the officer's face, even in that dim light he could see the quick gleam that dawned in his narrowed eyes.

Arden spoke without moving his lips. "Tub Cone and me was saddle pards fer years."

"I know," said the outlaw. "Do

yuh want to forget, to-night, that yo're a lawman?"

Slim suddenly holstered his gun. Sonny followed suit.

"I thought yuh'd feel that way about it," he drawled. "My hoss is down the street a piece, I think. Shall we start?"

Slim made no reply, but strode along at the outlaw's side, crossing the street with him below the corner. There stood Paint!

The Ranger was much taken aback, however, to see Jimmy Cullun, Baldy Gray, and Stumpy of the Rafter T gathered near the hitch rack. And it was a surprise all around. For a minute or two, nobody could think of anything to say. It *was* rather unusual, to see an Arizona Ranger and the Southwest's most wanted outlaw walking amiably together!

Stumpy broke the embarrassing silence. His red, leathery face cracked into a broad grin.

"Now this is what I calls good luck," he chortled. "It's goin' to make it tougher than ever on them Ballister cutthroats at Gallows Ranch."

"Who says we're goin' to Gallows Ranch?" asked the Ranger sharply.

"Well, ain't we?" Stumpy beamed.

"Let's ride," said the Ranger.

CHAPTER IX.

SMOKIN' A WASPS' NEST.

ABOUT three o'clock in the morning, nearly an hour before dawn, a solitary rider emerged from the desert sand hills that rimmed the headquarters of Gallows Ranch. He rode cautiously up to the house, dismounting about fifty yards from it.

For a few minutes, he listened intently while he took in the lay of the land. The moon was nearly gone, but all was luminous from the light of the stars, and his intent eyes missed nothing.

After satisfying himself that all was well, he strode boldly up to the house, crossed the teetering porch, and knocked loudly on the door.

When that failed to rouse any one, he began kicking at it.

"Wake up in thar!" he cried. "It's me—Webb Stewart."

The voice of Abe Ballister, dull with sleep, answered him faintly. Then a lamp was lighted inside, men's voices rumbled, and after considerable stirring about, the door was opened, and Stewart was admitted.

The men had just piled out of their bunks, and none was fully dressed. Red Hunt, grunting and swearing, was pulling on his boots, and Bill Prim was struggling into his shirt, while McMurk was walking sleepily about in his trousers only. The two Ballister brothers, Abe and the flabby Jake, had just come from their own room and were in an ill humor.

All of them, however, had buckled on their guns. That was always their last item to take off and their first to don again.

"Webb!" snarled Jake angrily. "What the blasted——"

"Nothin's wrong, is thar?" Prim growled.

"I thought we told yuh to lay low, Webb," said Abe Ballister, his voice harsh. "Yuh was supposed to stay in thet hide-out until this blows over. Yuh cain't have run out of grub and liquor."

Stewart plumped himself into a chair by the cold stove. His sharp-chiseled face seemed more haggard then ever, and there was a hunted look in his eyes, a nervous twitching around his thin-lipped mouth.

"I can't stand thet hide-away no longer," he groaned. "It's too lonesome. It's gittin' me. I'm afeard of the nights."

"Ain't it better than havin' the law git yuh, Webb?" Abe Ballister sneered.

"I dunno," Stewart panted, his long fingers drumming shakily on the butt of the Colt he wore in his shoulder harness. "Thar's a face—a voice, too—a-hauntin' me."

"Whose face?" demanded Prim contemptuously.

"Joe Cullun's," whispered the murderer, passing a trembling hand across his damp forehead. "I kin still see him pullin' the handle o' thet slot machine, and a-laughin'!"

"Bosh!" jeered Abe Ballister, curling his lip. "Thet's one killin' yuh'll never have to pay fer! It was me, Webb, thet blasted the head off thet fat leetle Ranger. Do yuh think *his* face bothers *me?* We're safe, Webb, and so are you."

"Yeah," sniggered McMurk. "What if yuh was layin' in jail like Tabor is?"

"Better have a drink and forgit about it, Webb," urged Jake Ballister.

Webb Stewart's hand shook so violently that he spilled most of the whisky, but he got a little down and it steadied him.

"No, I'm leavin' the country," he said defiantly. "I'm headin' pronto fer Mexico, and what I want is a divvy up on the dinero thet's in the pot. My share on thet last wet-stock deal——"

"What's *thet?*" shrilled Abe, springing to his feet.

At first, Stewart thought Ballister was making some objection to the proposed split-up, and then he saw that Abe wasn't looking at him, at all, but toward the door of the house.

"What is it, Abe?" demanded Red Hunt, his beefy hand dropping over the butt of his six-gun.

The gang waited, listening intently. The blinds at the windows were pulled down tightly, as they always were at night. There was no sound now, and Abe Ballister's stiffened figure relaxed.

"It was nothin', I reckon," he grunted. "Webb has got us jumpy with them yarns of his about faces an' voices. Mebbe yuh'd better bar thet door, Red, jist the same. Thar's nothin' like bein' keerful."

Red Hunt strode toward the door to fasten it, but before the ugly-faced desperado could reach it the door came bursting inward so violently that it was split from top to bottom.

Two pairs of shoulders had rammed it like battering rams, and into the dingy room plunged two rannies whom the gang instantly recognized. They were still whirling from the impact and came in through sheer momentum.

They knew the tall hombre as Ranger Slim Arden. The other, a smiling, blue-eyed youth in brown chaps and a checkered blue shirt, was the most feared gunman in Arizona—Sonny Tabor. Behind this pair were other men, but the gang couldn't see who they were yet, or how many.

"Fight, yuh mangy cutthroats—or crawl!" Slim Arden shouted, his face as hard as granite.

Even as he spoke his Colt winked flame and smoke, for the Gallows bunch, quick to recover from their surprise, were whipping out their guns. They weren't going to surrender. It would be to the smoky finish, this fight!

A hot wind blew the flame of the kerosene lamp as the inferno broke

loose. The room was lighted by the intermittent glare of rapidly fanned Colts; smoke churned and eddied in gray swirls to become the winding sheet of death itself. Red Hunt, the first in the line of fire, danced a crazy jig as bullets plowed through him. He spun around and fell with a weird yell.

Slim had sidled to the right, with his back to the wall, and Sonny Tabor, who had provided himself with another Colt .45 since his jail break, had shifted like a shadow to the left. The outlaw had dropped into a crouch, and his guns were roaring almost from the level of his knees.

There was nothing boyish in that bullet-dimpled face now! He still smiled, but that smile was not good to see, and his eyes were icy and merciless.

Jake Ballister, the pudgy younger brother of Abe, went down just as he was jerking his gun from the leather. He died almost instantly from a slug that severed a great artery in his throat and crimson spattered the floor as he fell. Bill Prim died with him at almost the same moment, his chest smashed by a brace of slugs from Sonny's thundering Colts.

Arden was hit in the upper part of the arm. He staggered, steadied himself with one hand against the wall, and continued to shoot. All was smoky chaos now; the table had been upset and the lamp had fallen to the floor where the wick still burned in a yellow flare.

Half a dozen slugs at least had been aimed at Sonny Tabor, and the wall behind him was pitted with many bullet holes, but he was as hard to hit as a shadow, and at each quick shift and side-step his .45s again roared destruction.

"Yuh killed my pard, yuh sidewinders!" Slim shouted, his voice rising above the bedlam of shots and yells. "And now *you* take it!"

Br-r-r-rang! Bang! Cr-r-r-rang! McMurk was the next to die in that mad nightmare of exploding guns.

Pierced by several shots, he crumpled against the stove and rolled from it to the wood box.

Bang! Jimmy Cullun's father was avenged.

A javelin of flame from one of Sonny's clamoring Colts streaked for Webb Stewart. The bullet smashed the Gallows foreman's heart, just as he was about to take another desperate shot. Sonny saw Stewart leap into the air, then fall like a dead tree.

Only seconds had elapsed since the smashing of the door, but in those moments the Ranger had reaped a gun harvest! Before Baldy Gray, Jimmy Cullun, and Stumpy were fairly into the room it was practically all over.

Another volley, and the last of the Gallows breed was accounted for. Abe Ballister went down with his gun spitting murderously, but ineffectually. He got to his feet again, lurched drunkenly as another slug reamed him, then tried to make his way into the room beyond. He fell on the threshold.

Then the clamor of the guns ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Silence brooded again over the headquarters of Gallows Ranch where Death was king.

A little party of five saddle-weary hombres halted in the desert to watch the sunrise. The eastern sky was soft with the warm colors of the new day; already the red rim of the sun could be seen climbing over the ragged peaks, and long streamers of orange and purple were sweeping

from one horizon to the other. The cactus wrens were awake, and the sweet smell of mesquite was in the air.

"Here's whar I leave yuh," said Slim, rubbing his newly bandaged shoulder. "I'll go to Piedras, I guess, and see how the sheriff's makin' out. Then I—I'll resign from the Arizona Rangers."

"Don't do anything like that, Slim," said Sonny Tabor quickly.

"But I'm unfaithful to my duty," said the Ranger bitterly. "I ought to at least make an *attempt* to arrest yuh, Sonny."

"All right, make it now," the outlaw smiled, and he whipped out a .45 and leveled it at Slim Arden. "I've got the drop, yuh see, and it's not yore fault if I make a get-away. Vamose from here! And you forget that resignin' stuff."

"Care if we shake hands first?" asked Slim with a slow grin.

"Proud to, Slim," Sonny chuckled, "and remember—if we ever meet again, I'll give yuh the first shot. Good-by, old-timer, and good luck!"

They watched Slim Arden until he was a mere speck on the western sky line, a slowly moving dot that finally vanished from sight among the hazy mists of morning. Sonny sighed, then turned somberly to the others.

"I reckon it's time now for me and Paint to say good-by," he said regretfully. "I don't think yuh need to worry about bein' mixed up in the Gallows show-down. Slim will fix it up with the sheriff. Maybe some day, we'll all meet again."

"I'm—hopin' so, Sonny," Jimmy Cullun faltered.

"Give my regards to yore mother, Jimmy, and you others—well, take care of her." The outlaw smiled. "I'm glad if I helped."

"Helped!" old Baldy yelped. "Why, us three never got in a shot! It's the only thing I can't forgive yuh fer, Sonny. I wanted to plug Webb Stewart my own self!"

"G'by," muttered Stumpy. He tried to grin, but the effort seemed to hurt his homely face, and his eyes were none too dry. "We onderstand. We savvy thet yuh've got to vamose, but"—his voice broke a little—"g'-by, yuh baby-faced bundle o' dynamite, and happy trails!"

With a little snort of eagerness, Paint waltzed away toward the southeast, his spotty hide glistening in the light of the newly risen sun, his mane and tail flowing in the wind.

Once again Paint's master had given the slip to the hangman. The wilderness was calling, and it was time to go.

Skinny Rides To Trouble

By Lee Bond

Author of "The Oklahoma Kid Blots A Brand," etc.

NONE of the brush clumps which clung to the ragged rim of the twisting canyon was tall enough to have hidden the carefully approaching cowboy if the waddy had remained upright. "Skinny" Shinn measured exactly six feet four inches in his socks, weighed a hundred and forty pounds, and looked as if he had never had enough to eat in his life.

But despite his bony appearance and loose-jointed gait, the unusually tall puncher was moving with a speed and ease which carried him to the brush along the canyon rim in an incredibly short time.

Skinny stooped as he reached the first tough bushes, removed his big, floppy black Stetson, and laid the hat carefully aside. He glanced back to where the big, sweat-marked bay bronc he had just quit stood eying him wonderingly. Skinny's yellow-thatched head twisted back around, and for a moment his angular, bony-cheeked, blunt-jawed face settled into a scowl.

His lips, usually wide and grinning, were a thin, puckered line, and

his blue eyes were troubled as he sat listening to the rolling thunder of swiftly fired guns. Those guns were slamming somewhere down in the canyon just beyond this brush, and Skinny felt a keen desire to snake on out along the rim until he could have a look-see.

At the same moment, he argued with himself that whatever was happening down in that canyon was none of his business, most likely. Yet there was a remote—a very remote—possibility that whatever was happening down in that canyon did concern him.

Skinny wore a single gun strapped low on his left thigh. His big, long-fingered left hand dropped, instinctively testing the gun to see that it was not jammed too far into the holster.

His lean body pressed close to the rocky soil, he began inching through the bushes, careful to make as little sound as possible. When the rim yawned blue and deep just before him, he flattened down still more, swerving left to where a big boulder reared up from the very brink, as if poised there a moment before leaping off into the canyon's misty depth.

But that old boulder had been there many a long century, and would probably remain a good many more, despite the fact that it was balanced in such a manner that a strong man could have made it move by shoving against it.

Skinny pressed close to the base of the balanced rock, noting how it stood upon a natural pivot. Then his eyes were raking out and down, studying the broad, boulder-strewn floor of the dry canyon.

He was less than a hundred feet directly above the canyon floor, yet a good twenty feet of the drop was sheer; weather-beaten rock wall which reached up to the rim. Beyond the straight drop, a very steep slope dropped on down to the floor of the canyon.

Skinny's eyes had little trouble locating one of the hombres who was burning so much powder. The fellow was directly below him, crouched behind a brush-shrouded boulder at the base of the steep slant. Then four puffs of smoke lifted from rock and bush farther out in the canyon's bottom, and Skinny's yellow-thatched head nodded knowingly.

"This feller jist under me here has got good cover, an' is managin' to stand off four others," he mused softly. "But that still don't tell me much."

Skinny craned his neck, shivering a little at the dismal *breeee!* of a bullet which had glanced from a boulder beside the crouching man at the bottom of the steep slope.

Skinny saw that hombre plainer as the man shifted—saw that he was a short, grizzled fellow, dressed in cow-country boots, dark woolen trousers, and gray flannel shirt. Behind the grizzled man, lying on the ground, was an expensive-looking gray Stetson, crown showing two black holes where a bullet had ripped completely through.

"That feller is a rancher, from his looks," Skinny muttered. "Prosperous, too, I'd bet. An' a rancher like that gittin' bayed—— Dangnation!"

Skinny's last word was one of sympathy. The grizzled ranchman below him had stood up cautiously, Winchester resting across the top of a rock. But as the grizzled hombre's head lowered for sighting, the man lurched, swayed backward, and fell heavily, right hand clutching at left elbow. Skinny saw crimson stain the man's clutching fingers, and watched the blocky, grim-lipped face

turn slowly white as the rancher lay there, glancing wildly about.

"Hey, boss, I think I winged the coyote that time!" a coarse, heavy-toned voice came from out in the canyon.

"Don't be fool enough to show yoreself," another voice roared in answer. "That old Simpson buzzard is as sharp as they come. Maybe he's playin' a trick; so keep yore head down, Carp."

"Yeah, Simpson might be playin' a trick," a third voice chimed in, "but I don't think so. I figger Carp tagged the skunk. Simpson ain't shootin' no more."

Simpson, the wounded rancher, evidently heard those words, and realized that he had to put doubt into the minds of his enemies. He reared up, staggered back to the rock, and leaned weakly against it, left arm dangling limply. Simpson's right hand pawed a six-gun from holster, however, and Skinny Shinn held his breath as he watched the rancher sight carefully.

Out in the center of the valley, a huge, moon-faced jasper had lifted himself slowly, and was standing half crouched, Winchester clutched in big, thick hands, bulging eyes rolling uneasily. Simpson's six-gun spat, and the fat walloper dived back into the brush from which he had arisen, his voice coming in shrill, angry howls.

But in that brief instant while the big man showed himself, this whole thing took on a different meaning so far as Skinny Shinn was concerned. Pinned to the moonfaced hombre's vest had been a star-shaped badge!

Skinny had unconsciously been rooting for that grizzled Simpson hombre, even figuring on helping him if things got too hot. Now, however, Skinny had other ideas.

He snaked his own six-gun out, cocked it carefully, and measured the distance down to Simpson's position through blue eyes that were slitted and eagle-keen.

"That Simpson feller has been up to somethin' crooked, looks like, or he wouldn't be tanglin' with the law," Skinny muttered. "With the job I've got to do in this country, I'll shore need the law on my side, so——"

Skinny sighted swiftly as he spoke, and the crash of the big .45 drowned out his words.

Behind his barricade of rocks, Simpson lurched wildly, flinging around in panic. A bullet had struck the rock only a foot from his body, spraying him with bits of lead and grit. Simpson's white face was tense and drawn, and his eyes were searching frantically along the base of the bluff.

"Drop that gun, Simpson," Skinny called grimly. "I've got yuh dead center in my sights, an' can kill yuh with my next shot. Drop that smoker!"

Simpson swayed, cursed wearily, and tossed the six-gun aside, good right hand lifting. From out in the valley came excited yells, yet no man showed himself until Skinny called out to them.

"All right, badge-toter, I've got yore man plumb tamed down fer yuh," the bony cowpoke yelled. "Yuh an' yore posse come on up an' snag him. He's through fightin' now."

"Who—who are yuh, feller?" Simpson called grimly. "Yuh ain't one o' them murderin' Leanin' L gunnies, or I'd know yore voice."

Skinny glanced beyond the wounded Simpson to where four men had quit cover and were advancing warily, guns ready for instant use.

"Yuh wouldn't know me, Simpson, since I'm a plumb stranger

around hyar," Skinny called, wanting to keep Simpson's attention. "I just rode over into this Arizona Territory from New Mexico way. The name is Shinn, in case——"

"Skinny Shinn!" Simpson cried in low, tense tones. "My gosh, son, turn that badge-toter an' them Leanin' L coyotes back. Skinny, yuh come huntin' yore missin' pard, Roy Stover, didn't yuh?"

Skinny Shinn almost slithered into full view before he could catch himself. "How'd yuh know about Roy Stover bein' my pard an' that he was missin'?"

"Not so loud!" Simpson croaked. "Unless yuh an' me can do somethin', Roy Stover will hang to-night just as shore——"

Simpson's voice ended with the dull, slapping sound of a bullet striking into yielding flesh. The grizzled rancher shuddered and toppled slowly forward. From out in the valley came an exultant whoop.

"I got him, boss!" a short, thick-bodied jasper yelled gloatingly. "Simpson was tryin' to sneak off up that slope yonder, blast him! But I stopped him that time."

II.

Simpson had not been trying to sneak away. On top of that, his back had been turned to that squat hombre who had downed him. Those two facts hammered through Skinny Shinn's brain in the fleeting moment it took him to twitch his big Colt up and sidewise.

The big gun spat flaming thunder. The squat jasper who had shot Simpson squealed like a stuck pig, fell kicking in a clump of prickly pear which grew among brown rocks. The fellow's voice lifted in a mighty wail, and he reared up, clawing at sides and back where spines had burned deeply into his flesh.

Skinny's big left hand swayed slowly, and from that jutting black gun came a continuous stream of flame and smoke. The huge, bug-eyed sheriff tangled over his own feet and fell heavily behind a wedge-shaped boulder. A lanky, stony-faced hombre and a big, powerfully built man wheeled and dodged into the protection of a brush clump.

Then guns were spitting angry replies to Skinny's shots, and the gaunt waddy crouched low as his deft fingers reloaded the cylinder of his hot gun. The instant that gun was reloaded he sent a slug digging into the boulder behind which the fat officer had hidden.

"Come out o' there, big feller!" Skinny yelled.

"Yo're tamperin' with the law, feller," the fat hombre's voice roared in answer. "This hyar is Sheriff Tom Duffy oratin'. Yo're under arrest fer—— Oweee!"

Sheriff Duffy's voice ended in a shrill wail. Skinny Shinn had seen one broad portion of the sheriff's anatomy exposed momentarily. A well-aimed slug from Skinny's guns burned lengthwise through a big hip pocket, and now Sheriff Duffy was on his feet, doing a wild and undignified dance, both hands clapped aft and saying things which were far from gentle or mild.

Rifle slugs were whispering deadly sounds in Skinny's ample ears, and he was forced to crouch low behind the balanced rock. He reloaded the two spent chambers in his gun while he waited for the storm of lead to pass.

"Yuh'll pay fer this, whoever yuh are," the sheriff was yelling hotly. "I'm wounded, but not bad enough to keep me from trailin' yuh down.

Coaxed us out into the open, then opened up on us, did yuh?"

"It'll do yuh no good to stall," Skinny answered hotly. "One of yore posse men murdered Simpson cold."

"That's a lie, Duffy!" the squat rascal who had tumbled into the prickly-pear nest howled. "Whoever that jasper is, he's lyin' when he says I shot Simpson down cold. Simpson was makin' a sneak, so I stopped him."

Skinny's six-gun began hammering madly, as he raked the canyon below with whistling bullets. But even as he fired Skinny was scuttling into the bushes behind him.

The gaunt cowpoke bored through the brush, heading for a deep, scar-like gap he had noticed in the bluff a few rods upcanyon. He came to the lip of the scar, nodding quick approval when he saw that it was, as he had hoped, a broad crack, which would let him down over the bluff to the steep, brushy slope beyond.

Sheriff Duffy and those other three were hammering away at the balanced rock with Winchesters, no doubt thinking Skinny had simply ducked down to reload once more.

The big, gawky cowboy hastily reloaded his six-gun, then slid into that narrow, boulder-strewn slit and began working his way swiftly down. Luck favored him, for the twisting and windings of the narrow slot hid him perfectly from the four gunmen below. And brush grew thickly at the base of the cliff, which made it simple enough for Skinny to get out on the steep slope without being discovered.

The brush thinned out after a few rods, however, and Skinny saw that he would be forced to cross openings from time to time as he worked on down toward the boulder where Simpson lay. Showing himself meant drawing the lead of those four riflemen, Skinny knew.

But he had ridden almost three hundred miles to find out why his stumpy, red-headed pard had apparently vanished into thin air here in this Arizona bad-lands country. And Simpson had proved definitely that he knew something of Roy Stover. Skinny was willing to take almost any risk in order to reach Simpson, in the hope that the man was not too far gone to talk.

"I've got to reach Simpson an' see if he's able to tell me what he meant about Roy hangin' to-night unless somethin' was done," Skinny panted as he crouched at the upper edge of the first dangerous opening.

The rifles out in the canyon were silent now. Skinny tensed his gaunt, stringy-muscled body, gripped his reloaded gun, and shot from the brush like a frightened buck, long legs hurtling him over the ground at an amazing speed.

He was halfway across the little clearing before bullets came whining hotly about him. The smash of guns rolled up from the valley floor, and Skinny heard the hoarse yelling of the four riflemen. Then Skinny was in brush once more, bending low as branches ripped and tore at him.

"Reload, men, an' watch sharp!" Sheriff Tom Duffy bellowed. "We've got that feller now, since he was fool enough to come down hyar. Any o' yuh ever see that string-bean jigger before?"

"He's a stranger ter us, Duffy," one of the other riflemen answered. "But he'll hole up in the bresh clump a while, that's shore. He's got to—— Hey, look out! Hyar he comes!"

Skinny Shinn was not holing up any place just then. The gaunt

waddy smashed from the lower edge of the thicket, six-gun spitting flame and smoke as he sighted a man rearing up from behind a brush clump out in the valley.

The hombre who had reared up dropped hastily back. Skinny's slug had come mighty close to the fellow's head. Then Skinny was entering another brush patch, only to bore through it like a cyclone and come out into still another opening.

The big waddy's wild charging, and the fact that he was not acting as the four riflemen had naturally expected him to act, was saving his life. The sheriff and his three companions were so rattled that their lead was flying wild, and Skinny Shinn took full advantage of that fact by racing on and on.

Once a bullet came close enough to leave a dull welt across his bony neck. But now Skinny saw the sheltering brush and boulders where the grizzled Simpson had fallen and forced his aching legs to hurl him the last few yards.

The gaunt waddy sent three quick shots smashing toward the four riflemen, who were in plain view. Then he dropped into the lee of the brush-shrouded boulder, panting hoarsely, eyes goggling slowly out as he stared about. Simpson's rifle and bullet-punctured Stetson were lying there on the ground. But the blocky, grizzled Simpson was nowhere to be seen.

"Keerful, men!" Sheriff Duffy's voice boomed through the canyon. "That animated match stick is hunkered behind them rocks an' bushes with Simpson now. Carp, yuh an' me will stay hyar an' keep that feller bottled up. Brock, yuh an' Mort take a pasear out to the rim above. We've got that snake right where we want him."

III.

Skinny Shinn knew that he did not dare let a couple of those riflemen get on the rim behind him. He had looked down upon Simpson from that same rim, and knew he would be killed if those riflemen ever reached that balanced rock, for there was no chance of him hiding.

Skinny raked the brush and rocks about him with troubled eyes. Simpson was alive, no question of that, for otherwise he would have been lying there where he had fallen. Skinny saw crimson stains on the brown stones, and could trace the stains to the edge of a thicket, into which Simpson had undoubtedly crawled.

"Simpson!" the lean cowpoke called, as soon as he could catch his breath.

Receiving no answer, Skinny moved toward the brush patch, careful to keep his tall body doubled over lest his head show above rocks and brush. He was peering into the thick brush when a voice came lashing down from somewhere up the slope, causing him to crouch flat.

"All right, Ranger, watch them snakes close now!" that voice called. "The boys an' me will get 'em hemmed in soon as we can get down there. Keep an eye on Brock Gantner an' that overfed sheriff. We want them two, especially."

"Ranger?" came a frightened voice from out in the valley, and Skinny heard brush pop noisily.

The tall waddy had recognized that voice which had come from up the slope. "Shore, Simpson, I'll keep an eye on them four jaspers," he called loudly. "But hurry, man. If they git to their hosses they might git clean away."

Skinny leaped to the boulder which had shielded Simpson earlier.

Peering over, he saw the big, burly hombre, the lanky fellow, and the squat jasper who had fallen into the prickly pear racing wildly toward the far side of the valley. The big sheriff stood in waist-deep brush, broad face a picture of puzzled uneasiness.

Skinny's Colt snapped forward, and from its yawning muzzle poured stabbing gashes of powder flame. The three men who were speeding across the canyon leaped and twisted crazily, yelling in genuine alarm as slugs popped and sang about them.

Skinny's gun ran empty just as the trio dived into a deep ditch which meandered along the valley floor. The gaunt waddy hastily reloaded his hot gun, grinning faintly when he saw the three hombres reappear, mounted on horses that were being quirted and spurred unmercifully. Those three were leaving there and leaving in a rush, which pleased Skinny Shinn a lot.

"All right, Mr. Crooked Sheriff," Skinny snarled. "Elevate them grub hooks an' drag yore carcass up hyar."

"I ain't no crook!" the huge sheriff yammered, big hands lifting jerkily. "I—I didn't know yuh was a Ranger, or I'd not have shot at yuh. Me an' the Leanin' L men was only tryin' to——"

"To murder a man," Skinny cut in sharply. "Come on. Git over hyar before I plumb run out of patience."

The big sheriff waddled from the brush, limping noticeably each time his left leg bore his weight. From behind Skinny came the slight sound of some one walking quietly, and the tall waddy glanced around to see Simpson coming toward him.

Simpson's left arm rode in a crude neckerchief sling, and the right side of his face and head were smeared with crimson. He looked white and sick, but he grinned reassuringly.

"Thanks fer backin' my bluff, son," he called quietly. "I reckon the war is over now, with that fat-headed sheriff scared green and them Leanin' L coyotes gone."

"Thanks fer thinkin' of that bluff, Simpson," Skinny laughed. "I was shore in a pickle ontil yuh run that Ranger sandy."

Skinny faced about, and was just in time to see the sheriff halting beyond the rock. Duffy's bulging eyes were troubled, and his face was very pale.

"Come on around behind this rock, yuh big hunk o' lard," Skinny growled. "Fine business, ain't it, when a sheriff tries to help murder an honest citizen?"

"But—but I wasn't tryin' to murder nobody," Duffy croaked.

He came stumbling around the boulder, bulging brown eyes more uneasy than ever when Simpson met him. Simpson yanked twin .45s from holsters that rode the sheriff's hugh thighs, and tossed the guns far out into the brush.

"Now sidle over to that rock yonder an' set down," Skinny snapped at the officer. "An' yuh can lower yore hands if yuh want."

"I don't feel like settin' down," Duffy growled. "That bullet o' yores blistered this hyar left hip o' mine somethin' fierce. But I'll overlook that, seein' as how there's been a misunderstandin' on both sides."

"Come on, Skinny," Simpson called grimly. "We better high-tail it while we're able. If Brock Gantner an' them two gun-slingin' punchers o' his get out on the rim above us, I'll get somethin' worse than a nicked elbow an' a bullet-cut scalp. Fact is, them three will murder us both if they get the chance."

"Don't listen to that ol' crook of

a Jim Simpson, Ranger," the fat sheriff growled hoarsely. "Mr. Gantner an' his punchers ain't murderers. They tipped me off that Simpson was sneakin' a big herd o' stolen cattle out o' the country. Help me arrest Simpson, an' we'll clear up the rustlin' trouble this country is sufferin'."

"Yeah, like yuh cleared up the robbin' an' such that was takin' place around hyar by jailin' Roy Stover an' chargin' him with murderin' Cal Blount, the cattle buyer," Jim Simpson flung hotly at the sheriff. "Stover never murdered Blount, even if Brock Gantner an' them two pet killers o' his, Mort Brule an' Carp Tustin, do claim they seen Roy drill Blount through the back, then rob him."

"Yuh're danged whistlin' I solved that murder case by jailin' that Stover skunk," Duffy roared. "An' I ain't fergittin' that Stover was stayin' out to yore 8 Bar 8, pertendin' to be huntin' a ranch he could lease or buy hyarabouts."

Skinny Shinn was taking in the conversation avidly, nerves jangling as he realized that his missing pard was into something more than an ordinary mix-up.

"Yuh think yuh've solved that case," Simpson growled at the sheriff. "But yo're only lettin' yoreself be used as a tool, Duffy. Roy Stover is not a murderer."

"He murdered Cal Blount, an' robbed Blount of a couple thousand dollars, which the cattle buyer was aimin' to pay yuh fer a herd o' cattle," the sheriff snarled. "I've got that Stover skunk cold turkey, an' he'll hang."

"With three witnesses to swear they seen him do murder an' robbery, I reckon Roy's case is kind o' hopeless." Simpson shrugged wearily. "But don't be too sure, Duffy. I happen to know who really did kill that cattle buyer."

"Hear that, Ranger?" the big sheriff cried exultantly, turning to Skinny Shinn. "Hear this ol' coyote same as admit that he was in on that cattle buyer's killin'?"

"All Simpson said was that he knowed who did kill this Blount feller yuh mention." Skinny forced his voice to sound calm.

"Yeah, an' the gent who killed Blount is Brock Gantner," Simpson said sharply. "Roy Stover was on his way from my place to San Carlos town an' run smack into Brock Gantner, Carp Tustin, an' Mort Brule, all three bendin' over Cal Blount, searchin' Blount's dead body. Gantner's gun was still smokin' when Roy, after hearin' a shot just ahead o' him, spurred through a screen of bresh an' rode up on them three."

"Lies!" Duffy yowled. "Ranger, that's jist opposite from what happened. Mr. Gantner an' his two men heard a shot, an' rode down a canyon in time to see this Roy Stover snake searchin' Blount, the cattle buyer. Blount was dead, an' Gantner got the drop on Stover an' fetched him in to town. Git the drop on Simpson, Ranger, an' we'll take——"

"I'm not a Ranger," Skinny snarled. "Simpson called me Ranger, just to throw a scare into you an' them murderin' whelps yuh had with yuh. I'm Roy Stover's pard, an' hyar's somethin' that'll teach yuh not to call Roy a murderin' snake like yuh have."

Skinny's long right arm whipped up and out, propelling a big, knobby fist. That fist landed with the force of a maul against Sheriff Duffy's three chins, and the thick-witted badge-toter sat down with a jarring suddenness.

"Come on, Skinny!" Jim Simpson rasped. "Brock Gantner an' his two pards framed a hangin' bee in San Carlos with Roy Stover the guest of honor, so to speak. If they beat us back to town——"

Skinny Shinn heard no more of what Jim Simpson was saying. The huge sheriff had lurched suddenly upright, moonface purple with rage. Skinny saw the sheriff's right arm spring back, then dart forward, but did not sense the danger until too late. A rock the size of a man's fist struck Skinny a smashing blow in the temple, and the gaunt cowpoke sprawled limply sidewise, out cold.

IV.

Skinny Shinn regained his senses when a booted foot crashed solidly into his ribs. The gaunt puncher gasped, rolled weakly aside, and lay listening to harsh, ugly voices that came seeping through the pain fog that still dulled his brain. The shock of that rock striking him on the head was passing, however, and his eyes focused, becoming less glassy.

Skinny forgot his throbbing head instantly, for he was looking directly at Sheriff Tom Duffy, who sat leaning back against a big rock, face a white, crimson-smeared mask. Duffy's face showed the unmistakable signs of having been thoroughly pummeled by hard knuckles, and the sheriff acted as if he was too sick to care what went on about him.

Beside the sheriff sat old Jim Simpson. The 8 Bar 8 owner's face was also a bruised, crimson-smeared mask, and Skinny realized suddenly that neither the sheriff nor Simpson had been talking. But those voices still came plainly, and Skinny twisted his aching head, to discover three hard-case jaspers standing only a few feet beyond, staring down upon him out of eyes that were coldly dangerous. He recognized the three hombres as the ones who had been with the sheriff earlier, helping bay old Jim Simpson here behind these very rocks.

Skinny sat up, wincing at the stab of pain which ran along his boot-bruised ribs.

"Take it easy, Skinny," Jim Simpson called warningly. "That big feller is Brock Gantner, owner o' the Leanin' L. The gangly, frozen-faced hombre is Mort Brule, an' the square-built vinegarroon is Carp Tustin. This muddle-headed sheriff bested me right after he knocked yuh out, then called them three pizen things back here, much to his sorrow."

Barrel-chested Brock Gantner spat an oath toward Simpson, warning the old fellow to keep his mouth shut. The Leaning L owner's small dark eyes were flaming coldly, and his thick, crooked lips were lifted from huge white teeth when he turned to stare down upon Skinny.

"So yuh come nosin' around hyar huntin' that red-headed feller, hey?" Gantner rumbled.

"I come lookin' fer my pard, Roy Stover." Skinny nodded.

His eyes shifted to lank, stony-faced Mort Brule. Slitted black eyes and thin, bloodless lips gave the stony-faced gunman a truly sinister look, and Skinny knew instantly that of the three Brule would prove the most deadly in any sort of fight.

Carp Tustin, a sour, dark-featured man with chill gray eyes and full stamp of an out-and-out cutthroat, was glowering at Skinny. Tustin's right shirt sleeve was red-stained at the shoulder, where Skinny's bullet had nicked him, throwing him into the prickly-pear clump earlier.

"Go right ahead, yuh blasted

crane, an' look us over good," Brock Gantner snarled. "Yo're gonna git that long neck o' yores stretched plenty, feller, an' that danged pronto."

"I don't savvy this a-tall, Mr. Gantner," the huge sheriff gurgled. "Why did yuh an' yore two punchers jump me? I never done nothin' to yuh fellers, did I?"

"I tried all along to tell yuh that Gantner an' these two were plain skunks," old Jim Simpson answered the sheriff. "Yuh fool, they're afraid it might finally soak through that thick head o' yores that *they* killed Cal Blount, so they aim to hang yuh before yuh get such notions."

"An' we'll see that a mob busts down yore jail to-night an' hangs Roy Stover!" Mort Brule grinned coldly at the sheriff.

"Yore neck is gonna stretch, too, Simpson, don't fergit that," Carp Tustin rumbled. "Yuh ol' buzzard, this splatter-brained Duffy never would 'a' got suspicious of us three if yuh had kept yore mouth shut."

"I doubt if Duffy ever would git suspicious, anyhow, because he ain't got that much sense," Brock Gantner growled. "But the fool objected when I wanted to hang this Skinny Shinn snoop an' ol' Simpson, so we'll hang the sheriff along with them other two."

"Yuh jaspers ain't gonna hang me," Duffy roared. "By gollies, I'm beginnin' to savvy a few things now! Maybe I have been dumb, but yuh three better not——"

The sheriff's voice ended in a hoarse snarl as he hurtled to his feet, massive arms flailing out wildly. Brock Gantner and Mort Brule rushed the sheriff, intending to shove him back to earth. But that big officer was a hard hombre to handle.

Brule crashed backward, cursing through crimson-smeared lips, knocked slightly dizzy. Brock Gantner howled wildly when a huge fist cracked against his cheek. Seeing that his two companions had more than a handful of trouble, Carp Tustin ripped out twin guns, charging the snarling, fist-swinging sheriff. And in that moment Skinny Shinn came to life.

Skinny saw his own gun, plus the six-gun and rifle that belonged to Jim Simpson, piled beside a bush a few feet away. He lifted himself half erect, then dived wildly toward the piled weapons as Mort Brule yelled, drew twin guns.

Only the fact that Brule was groggy from a wallop in the teeth saved Skinny's life. Brule triggered, and his slugs flew wild by a narrow margin.

Skinny landed on chest and elbows, bony hands scooping frantically at the two six-guns—his and Jim Simpson's—which lay beside the rifle. Skinny rolled sidewise even as he palmed the guns, and leaden death churned the earth where he had been a moment before.

He spun around as he rolled, however, and his hot, glinting eyes showed him that Carp Tustin had succeeded in clubbing the sheriff senseless, and that old Jim Simpson was springing toward Brock Gantner's legs from behind.

Gantner and Carp Tustin had whirled to face Skinny, and red lances of blazing powder licked hungrily from the barrels of their guns as they snarled oaths. But Skinny's own weapons flamed, and Tustin spun, sobbing a choked oath as his right leg crumpled, letting him fall limply. Brock Gantner toppled at the same instant, for Jim Simpson had crashed into his knees from behind, sending him sprawling face-down.

Skinny felt the burn of a bullet tearing through the flesh of his upper right arm, and knew that the gun dropped from his right hand. Another bullet seared along his bony right jaw even as he shifted, left-hand gun stabbing out. Skinny's weapon blasted throatily, and Mort Brule's head jerked sharply sidewise. Then Brule's body thumped the ground solidly. That murderous jasper had pulled his last gun trigger!

Skinny watched Brock Gantner kick loose from old Jim Simpson and lurch upright. Gantner's guns steadied, black bores weaving to target. Skinny Shinn triggered, and it seemed that the three six-guns, two in Gantner's big fists and the one in Skinny's blared at the same instant.

Skinny felt a slug rake skin from his side, and heard another slap the dirt an inch or less from his body. But Brock Gantner dropped both guns, flung his hands to his deep, arching chest, and stood swaying uncertainly for a moment, a dazed, sick expression spreading slowly over his face. Then Gantner coughed crimson spray, buckled at the knees, and struck limply across the earth, death rattling in his corded throat.

"Yuh done it, son!" Jim Simpson whooped. "Danged if yuh didn't down all three o' them killers. Hurt much, Skinny?"

"Bullet-nicked some, but nothin' fatal," Skinny called. "How's the sheriff feelin'?"

"Turrible!" Duffy groaned. "I shore made a mess o' things, looks like."

Skinny got to his feet, walked to where Carp Tustin lay shivering and moaning. Tustin's leg was broken at the thigh, and his face was the sick, white face of a man who suffered terrifically.

"Well, sheriff, here's one o' the snakes that will live, anyhow," Skinny called. "We'll git him to town, toss him into the jug, an' let the law hang him instead o' Roy Stover. Tustin may be the one who bushwhacked Cal Blount."

"Guess again, long feller," Tustin choked. "Brock Gantner shot that cattle buyer down cold. Brock was mad because Blount wouldn't buy Leanin' L cattle instead o' 8 Bar 8 stuff. Brock swore that he would only stick Blount up, or Mort Brule an' me never would 'a' helped him. As it was, Mort an' me was only onlookers, because we never helped shoot or rob that cattle buyer. Brock done the whole thing an' cussed me an' Mort fer yaller rats when we wouldn't help."

"I reckon yuh heard that, sheriff." Skinny grinned widely. "Now will yuh go turn Roy Stover out o' jail?"

"I shore will." The big sheriff nodded gloomily. "That sorrel-topped little cuss will have the laugh on me, too. He's told me every day I'd have to let him loose sooner or later, an' that he'd whup me the minute he was out from behind bars."

"If Roy said he'd whip yuh, sheriff, maybe yuh better give me yore jail key an' let me go turn him loose," Skinny chuckled. "Because that little hunk o' sorrel-topped dynamite wasn't kiddin' when he said he'd give yuh a lickin'. Seems to me yuh've had punishment enough fer one day, so sort o' stay under cover when we git our prisoner to town an' turn Roy loose."

NOTICE—All stories in Street & Smith's magazines are new. No reprints are ever used.

The Whistlin' Kid in the Bad Lands

By Emery Jackson

Author of "The Whistlin' Kid's Private War," etc.

TWO reports, dull but loud, like the discharge of a cannon, brought the "Whistlin' Kid" up, all-standing, out of bed at three in the morning.

He had turned in almost twelve hours before, tired out from forty sleepless and active hours in which he had rounded up "El Zurrido," bandit and rustler, and handed him over to the deputy sheriff at Mejilla.

That was the custom of range dicks of the Cattlemen's Protective Association, of whom Pete Prentiss, the Whistlin' Kid, was the ace and shining star.

The deputy sheriff and the owners of Mejilla County had rejoiced. They would have made a hero out of the Kid, but all he wanted was a meal and rest for himself and his buckskin, Speed, who had shared his exertions.

They gave Speed cracked oats and a loose-box fetlock deep in clean straw, with clear, cold water and hay for dessert. They gave the Kid all he could think of to eat and the best bed in the Owners' Hotel. They would have given him all he could drink at the bar, but the Kid did not indulge in hard liquor.

Now he had slept almost halfway round the clock, and he would have kept on if the explosions had not awakened him.

Instantly he thought of El Zurrido and of the local jail.

Probably he had been thinking of them in his sleep subconsciously.

"Our *cárcel* ain't so much," the deputy said to him, "but I reckon it'll hold the Rattler till ter-morrer. Then we'll shift him to the county seat. They got a real jail over there, but the jedge is over there to-day, an' I'll have to wait till to-morrer to git the warrant to move him. He'll walk out of there to the gallows if he gits his desserts.

"El Zurrido" was the assumed name of the outlaw. It meant the "Rattler." It did not entirely fit his nature. A rattlesnake, the Kid told himself, gives a warning, although probably there is nothing sporting about that, but merely a buzzing sound to hold the attention of the victim while the snake gets close enough to coil and strike.

El Zurrido struck suddenly and silently. But he liked to consider himself deadly. It added to his prestige, to the terror of his name. And he had a habit of leaving the rattle of a diamond-back snake as a souvenir of his coups.

The Kid's mind became instantly alert. He remembered the *cárcel,* or jail, as a squat structure of adobe with thick walls and a substantial roof of heavy beams to which were spiked down sheets of corrugated iron that caught the sunshine and its heat. An uncomfortable place, with little furniture and less ventilation.

It had a heavy door of cedar with a steel grating in it for the inspection of the jailer. There was a small window, too small for a man to crawl through, which was also barred.

The jailer appointed by the deputy sheriff lived in a shack a few feet from the *cárcel.* He was supposed to visit his prisoner, or at least inspect him regularly, to give him his meals.

The prisoner, when he was of the type of El Zurrido, would be searched. He would be left with nothing better than his finger nails with which to dig through the adobe walls or undermine them.

Yet, as the Kid leaped out of bed and slid into his clothes with the swift dexterity of a lightning-change artist in a show, he had a definite and increasing hunch that the double explosion meant that Mejilla had lost, or was about to lose, its prize prisoner.

The Kid's responsibility was passed over, save for his own interest in seeing that El Zurrido got what he deserved. The man was a killer as well as a thief. A murderer who should be decorated with the Order of the Hempen Halter.

Fast as the Kid clad himself, boots, chaps, gun belt and holstered hogleg, he heard the sounds that confirmed his hunch.

Cries, the sound of running feet clattering on the wooden sidewalks, more muffled in the street, with the fast *clip-clop* of horses' hoofs. Then two or three shots from six-guns, mingling and confusing, as the Kid dashed out the hotel, his own hogleg ready.

Five horsemen, bunched like racers at the end of a close race, passed him in full gallop.

One flung a shot at him, catching the glint of his .45 in the dim light from the hotel window. For a saddle shot it was close. The Kid felt the hot breath of its passing on his cheek.

He flung back a bullet and saw he had scored as a man swayed in his saddle. The bunch raised a thick dust that screened them, and now other riders barged in between the Kid on the raised sidewalk and his targets.

The outlaws were well mounted.

They swept out of town at record speed, thundered over the bridge that spanned Mejilla Creek, ahead of their pursuers, steadily gaining, off into the flats, where the chaparral grew ten feet high, and the *huisache* and mesquite gave them ample hiding places.

The Kid shouted and flung up an arm as the deputy sheriff pounded by. The deputy reined in.

"He's gone," he said. "Got to git after him."

"You won't catch him right off, with his start," said the Kid. "There's no moon, you can't read sign. Hop off, have a drink, an' tell me what happened?"

The idea appealed to the harassed deputy. He had lost his prisoner, and he might lose his job, but the Kid had brought in Zurrido when the sheriff and all his deputies had failed. His advice was worth listening to and heeding, young through he might be.

And free drinks were never to be turned down.

The number of citizens who turned out of their beds and had the same idea was amazing. The Kid stuck to cigars and soda water and charged the bill to the C. A., which ultimately would be paid by the local owners.

He had his own idea of what had happened, but he listened to the local theories, sifting their truth. The main thing that concerned him was that Zurrido was once more in the open.

"That fat slob, Bennion, went to sleep," said the deputy. "He had a big supper and a drink or two. He figgered the jail would hold the Rattler. So some of his friends drift in. They must have had a spare hawss along. My bet is they stuck around at Primera's *cantina*, and used his corral, but you'll have a hard time to git anything out of thet hombre,"

"We'll leave thet to you," said the Kid. "Go ahead."

"Bennion is snorin'. Likely enough they savvy thet. Might have bought him a few drinks. They give the Rattler the tip, hand him fuses an' caps an' giant through the door, or winder. Fix the time. He had a watch, or they'd have give him one. He had cigarette makin's an' matches. They slip him a drill or a chisel. An' he goes to work."

"He took some big risk," said a bystander.

"Not so much. He'd slip in a couple of shots, light the fuses, go back to the fur end of the jail. Dobe is sort o' brittle. One end wall blew out, an' the roof sagged down, but it left him room to make his bolt to where they was waitin'. How about it, range dick?"

The Kid agreed with him, and said so.

"Now he's in the bosque, with his pals," said the deputy. "What's the next move?"

"Mine," said the Kid. "I brought him in, an' I'll bring him back. Only, *this* time, hold him. It'll be dawn in an hour. I kin cut their sign."

"I'll organize a posse," said the deputy.

"Fine," said the Kid. "But give me an hour's start. I don't want dust advertisin' a pursuit."

"You mean you want to play it solo?"

"I did before. I might need your help, as you follow. I figger he's lit out fer the bad lands."

A general murmur approved the Kid's idea.

"It's all alkali. You might as well send up rockets as let a posse git busy too sudden. They'll be lookin' fer air sign. An' you kin foller my

hoof tracks. Give me two or three hours' start. Then come on. I'll rig my hawss an' git goin' soon's the East is red."

They downed their drinks and drank his health and luck. He was younger than any of them, but he had already proved his worth, and they respected him.

"It's your first move," said the deputy. "We're sidin' you, Prentiss. What's eatin' you now?" he demanded from the jailer, Bennion, who entered at that moment.

"You don't need to use thet tone with *me*," said Bennion in an injured voice. "I jest found somethin'."

"What do you expect me to do, kiss you! If you'd been on the job, you'd still have one, an' I'd still be sure of mine. It's a fine time to find somethin'. What is it, the key to the door?"

Bennion flushed. The Kid felt sorry for him, saw that he had a drink set in front of him. The jailer set a little box made of aspen bark on the bar counter.

"This was inside," he said. "On the shelf."

The deputy opened it up. It was more package than actual box, but it was a neat job. He took one look at it and passed it on to the Kid. The others crowded in to see.

It was a souvenir of El Zurrido, the rattles from a diamond-back's tail. Nine of them perfect, with the button broken.

"Some snake," said the deputy. "Must have been big around as my arm. Well, thet's the Rattler's trade mark, all right. One of his souvenirs. It's his way of thumbin' his nose at you. You want this, Prentiss?"

The Kid shook his head. "I'll see kin I fetch back the snake," he said.

II.

Speed was well rested, and the Kid made good time across the sage flats toward the malpais, that was marked on the horizon by the hazy shapes of natural monuments that began to take on color and shape as they neared them.

The Kid whistled softly, but not from any jovial mood. His face, smooth enough, except for sun wrinkles about the eyes, was grim, its hawklike features, with the dark, questing eyes, were serious and intent.

The tune was "The Cowboy's Lament." That was the tale, in song, of the cowboy who "knew he'd done wrong." And it was his favorite air. He doubted if El Zurrido had any sense of right or wrong, or ever would have, even with the hangman's noose about his neck.

Soon the Kid could see plainly the weird, fantastic rocks, bright red in hue, carved, twisted, pierced by wind and sand, outstanding from the main mass of the mesa-like islands. The whole effect was that of a seashore from which the water had long ago receded after it had worn the coast into strange masses, great and small.

Some were like images, others like ruined castles and palaces, with battlements, with windows and arched entrances.

The Kid had seen other places like this, but they never failed to affect his imagination, to suggest that here was an ancient city, peopled by ghosts of the past.

He knew better than that, and fancy gave place to stern reality. He had been following plain sign of four riders—Zurrido and his rescuers. They were somewhere in this fastness, and he did not doubt there were other outlaws there.

It was a perfect hide-out for men and horses, and for stolen stock. It was both a maze and a fortress.

The sign began to fade out as surface rock took the place of alkaline soil. The Kid realized his approach might have been observed, but he was not yet within range of either six-gun or rifle, and once among the monuments he could get close without exposing himself.

But the main thing was to follow the sign, even after it had vanished. That seemed like a miracle, but the Kid had solved such puzzles before and meant to do so now.

The sun was beginning to throw long shadows that constantly changed the aspect of the rock masses, of the mesa itself. But the light was back of him, it threw into relief slight indications of the displacement of the shallow silt, of scuffed surfaces, and he held on, knowing he was still on the trail.

But at last he halted, baffled. All sign had vanished.

He might find a solution by exposing himself, and he took the chance, between two monuments, one of which looked like an ocean island at low tide, fretted into pinnacles above shallow caverns; the other, of harder rock, strangely like a mammoth bishop's miter, the halves divided to the base.

Br-rang! That was—to the Kid—the unmistakable sound of a high-powered rifle.

There was no sign of smoke. What little issued from the barrel merged with the heat haze that was starting with the lift of the sun, beginning to distort the weird outlines of the rocks.

The slug zipped between his right shoulder and his ear. It was a close call. It meant that the sniper lookout was a master shot. The Kid did not consider it as a warning. The man had shot to kill. Zurrido and his followers protected themselves by eliminating their enemies at the first opportunity.

The Kid swung Speed and himself out of immediate danger between the two sides of the miter.

He saw the mark on the rock where the bullet had hit and studied it, gauged its angle.

Then he deliberately exposed himself again, a hundred yards to the right, riding to that point behind cover of the monuments.

Br-rang! This time lead scored across one thigh, scared the leather of his chaps, nipped at his Levis, scraped his flesh.

The Kid listened to the scream of the bullet, noted where it struck on the base of a rock that looked like an Egyptian Sphinx.

Once more he repeated his maneuver, drawing the fire of the lookout as the buckskin sprinted across the open.

It was a dangerous game, but the Kid played it with gusto, loving the risks. And he paid tribute to the sniper, who snipped a button off his shirt as Speed raced to cover.

As the slug slithered over his chest, he threw himself backward over the cantle of his saddle, giving Speed an encouraging word to go ahead.

He lay there, and crawled to cover behind a buttress of the weathered rock, only his feet exposed.

The Kid was fussy about his boots. They were handmade, handsewn, in decorative design. They might be damaged.

They fitted him like gloves, and as he lay he toed himself out of them, wriggled back.

Br-rang! One of his boots was pierced by the sharpshooter.

The Kid, in cover, slowly worked them in as if sorely wounded. The

sniper would surely think him crippled, creeping into some place where he would be in shadow, hidden from the cruel, expert marksman, to die.

He could imagine the sniper gloating over his success.

And, for the third time, he saw where the lead angled on surface rock.

He knew the science of the old bee hunters seeking a honey tree. They would catch bees and release them, watching the angles of their flight.

Instead of bees, the Kid watched bullets.

Where those three lines of flight came together he would find the sniper.

The Kid knew he had located him, definitely, high up on the mesa wall, where shadows revealed a ledge.

The rustlers had some way to take in their horses, but that would be hard to find, would put him in the open. But he saw how he could work unseen among the monuments, and gain the breakdown on foot.

He thought he could climb unnoticed to the ledge above it.

He found a niche where he could place Speed, where the buckskin would be in shadow for several hours. He gave Speed water from his canteen out of the punched-in crown of his Stetson, fed him a measure of oats from his tarp, scratched him behind the ears and under the jaw.

"Stay here till I git back, ol'-timer," he said.

Speed nuzzled him to show he understood. The Kid started for the mesa breakdown, using all his craft to go subtly and smoothly.

Twice he had to lizard himself along scanty draws, but he made the main cliffs at last, hit the fissure he had picked out, and climbed its chimney with knees and elbows, with fingers and toes set in tiny clefts and on projections.

He reached a ledge, then another rift, and reached the natural terrace he was sure was well above the one where the sniper crouched.

Foot by foot he wormed along, and suddenly he caught the smell of cigarette smoke. It was plain to the Kid that the lookout thought he had killed the intruder and was rewarding himself with a quirly.

He might be going to make a report, or he might stay on post until his relief came, or somebody arrived, to ask the cause of the shooting.

The Kid figured that if any such person had come, he would have left long ago, or still be there.

The Kid snaked up to the edge of the terrace. The sniper was alone, taking his ease.

The Kid dropped a small fragment of weathered rock. It hit the ledge in front of the man, who looked up. And his face seemed to freeze as his eyes widened, and his jaw went slack at sight of the muzzle of the Kid's .45 staring at him with its unwinking eye, menacing and deadly.

"Stay as you are, hombre," said the gritty voice of the Kid. "Sabe? *Bueno!* Now set down that rifle in front of you. Do it nicely, amigo. Now toe it off the ledge."

The other hesitated.

"You had three shots at me, *hermano,*" the Kid told him. "I'll jest take *one* at you if I have to. An' I'll drill you from your skull to shoe sole, plumb down your spine. This is Prentiss, of the C. A. I took El Zurrido in once, an' I aim to take him in again. I don't bother about haulin' dead meat. I kin leave *you* to the buzzards."

The sniper gave a grimace that was half snarl, half nervous grin. Beyond the dead eye of the hogleg

he saw the dark eyes of the Kid, shining with purpose.

He shoved the rifle off into space.

"I queet, señor," he said.

The Kid slid down to him, landing three feet away, covering his man all the time. He tied his hands behind his back, marched him to a recess in the cliff, where he hog-tied him, gagged him, and left him lying on his face, hidden by the brush that grew there scantily.

"I'll be back or send back fer you later, hombre," he promised, "providin' I don't git polished off myself. You'll have to take your chances on thet."

It was easy enough to find the trail by which the sniper had come from the outlaws' hide-out. It led along a deep cleft, came to a space where it ended, and a ladder was clamped to the rock to a lower landing.

It was some long way from that lookout ledge. They might not have heard the rifle shots. The wind blew off the mesa and would carry sound off. But the Kid could hear voices, then laughter, as if at some crude jest.

It was flesh-crawling work to go down the ladders, three of them, face to the wall, back to any one who would spot him. The Kid took the rounds swiftly, his head twisted, looking down as well as he could. If they caught him it was all up with him.

It seemed they relied upon the sniper and the difficulty of trailing to the right spot in the mesa.

Yet El Zurrido had learned through bitter experience that the Kid could find sign when it was invisible to others. It seemed as if he was careles. No doubt he was drinking, after his escape, to celebrate it. His pals would have brought liquor from the saloon if there was none cached at the hide-out.

The voices and laughter were close. There was one more ladder that ended on the floor of the cleft. He could see the trail indicated to the left.

The Kid went down the vertical ladder as swiftly as a gymnast. It was clamped to the rock, and here and there were hand grips of iron set into the frame. It made the going easier.

He was halfway down when he knew he had been wrong to think El Zurrido careless. As his weight swung to one of the grips, it seemed to come away. He had barely time to realize that he had released some simple but efficient mechanism.

The grip was still affixed to the frame, the whole ladder was swinging outward from the cliff. He heard the clang of an alarm bell as he fell backward through space. He landed on stony ground, and the back of his head struck the rock.

III.

The Kid was still unconscious as they trussed him up. He came to with his knees drawn up to his chest, his hands clasped in front of him and his wrists bound tightly. So were his ankles. A stout stick was thrust beneath his knees, between them and his forearms.

His head ached as if the warm flow that came from the back of his skull was his brains oozing out.

He looked at the grinning outlaws through a haze. There were seven of them. El Zurrido, with his flat face where the nose lay even with his cheekbones, as Indian as part of his heritage.

One eye had been injured. It had a film over it that some day would

blind it, probably spread to the other.

The Kid knew all about that; knew, also, the fiendish thoughts that could rise in the brain back of those eyes and the narrow, sloping forehead.

El Zurrido's lips were stained with tobacco juice, his ragged mustache was like the whiskers of some wild beast above his yellow teeth, wide apart, saw-edged, between which showed the tip of his tongue. His whole face was a mask of evil and gloating, hideous triumph.

"Some day, amigo," he had promised the Kid when he was taken, "I shall get out. Then I shall hunt *you* as you hunted me. And I shall show you what the Rattler does to those he hates, as I hate you, you range dick!"

The memory of that was vaguely registering in the Kid's mind. It grew clear swiftly. El Zurrido was talking.

"It is too bad we shall not be here to see the sport, amigo, but you will be interested, if not amused, yourself. And before you die, before the Rattler strikes, you will admit that I am a very clever person indeed."

He spoke in Spanish, knowing that the Kid understood and could speak the language. It was said that El Zurrido came of a good family and had been well educated before the evil streak came out in him, proved him a throwback to a mixed ancestry. His Spanish was that of a grandee of the *fine gente*. It made his threat more devilish.

The sun was climbing high. It must be about nine o'clock, the Kid told himself, noting the shadow flung by a stick that had been set upright in the dirt, his own squat shadow thrown to one side.

He wondered if the posse had started out. It would not do him much good. He had not counted on them; but, then, he had not counted on this tangle.

He doubted very much the posse's ability to follow the tag end of the sign. It had been hard for him, and if it had not been for his craft in angling the three lines of shot to a common base, he would have failed.

They would not get as far as he did. Even though the Kid had disposed of the lookout, the posse would not know where to tackle the cliffs, whether to ride along their foot or not. And there was small chance of their discovering where the horses of the outlaws were stowed.

El Zurrido had proved himself too cunning for that. The last time the Kid had taken him in the open, before he had time to get back to his lair. In his own den he was too well protected.

The Kid looked dully at a low cage of wire, square-meshed, with openings about a quarter of an inch apart. It was about six feet square, perhaps two high. It had a door, or gate, made of solid wood. The top of that was connected with a string which in turn was attached to a sort of walking-beam arrangement, with the beam at an angle.

On the higher end there was an empty gallon oil can. A half inch iron pipe projected from a ledge, the tip above the can. This tip was plugged with a cork.

El Zurrido saw the Kid's eyes take in the apparatus, and the outlaw chuckled.

The Kid knew he was in a desperate plight. Aside from El Zurrido, the rest were silent, with a horrible intentness of silent laughter. They were sure of him, as sure that he would be presently dead as boys who tie a cat in a sack with rocks, or fasten a heavy weight about its neck before they toss it in a pond.

But the Kid's fate would not be as swift as that. His senses, spurred by his position, seemed to clear and sharpen. A smell of musk came to him. He saw something moving, squirming in the cage, a shifting, curving coil of diamond-patterned snake. A rattlesnake! As big around, almost, as his thigh.

The Kid had never seen such an enormous one, unless his eyes still played him false.

"That is my namesake," said El Zurrido. "It is the king of all rattlers. *Zurr* for the hombre, my pretty one!"

He rattled a stick across the front of the cage. It roused the snake. Its flat head lifted from its coil, showed the forked tongue, and hollow fangs half lifting from where they lay, poison sacs at their bases. Its rattles whirred.

"Amigo," said El Zurrido, "it is in my mind that you will not have come entirely alone. That fool of a deputy will organize a posse. Wisely, you would not be of it. But in it will be most of the available fighters of Mejilla. Very anxious to wipe me out. But not too efficient. You yourself were *too* efficient—and walked into my trap."

"You know," said the Kid coolly, "you were right to call that snake your namesake. It looks like you, Zurrido. Very much like you."

A spasm of hate passed like a dark cloud over El Zurrido's face, then he laughed.

"You can talk to him later," he said. "For I and my friends here are paying Mejilla a little visit in the absence of the posse. I do not like the place. I have a grudge against it. I should like to give them something to remember me by. I have ruined the jail. I shall rob the bank and one or two likely stores. And if anybody tries to get in our way it will be too bad for them, with the posse out of it. For we shall ride in a different route from the one by which we came out."

The Kid would not show what he felt, the vision of the town terrorized by these fiends.

"I leave one man behind," said Zurrido. "My lookout. He can pick off a few of the posse at his ease. An excellent marksman, Pedro. It is a wonder he missed you."

"He did not see me," said the Kid, noting the suspicion that suddenly came into El Zurrido's ill-matched eyes. "I am clever in my own way, Zurrido."

"I will admit that. But your cleverness will do you no good any more. You see, before I leave I uncork the pipe. Water will drip into the can. When there is enough water it will tip and lift the door of the cage. That is set where the sun will annoy the rattler. We shall place you where you can watch all that goes on, except the snake. That we leave to your imagination."

El Zurrido laughed, and they all laughed with him. This was not the first time they had tortured a victim with the infernally ingenious device.

"You sit with your back to the door. You can watch the drops of water. And you may watch the shadow of that stick. We have it all closely calculated. We may be a few drops, or an eighth of an inch off. But when the shadow shrinks to this mark I set, the can will be full enough, the door will open, and you will be in the way of the much-annoyed rattlesnake."

It was a hideous death. No device of the Spanish Inquisition might match it. But the Kid managed a smile.

"Do I get a cigarette before you go?" he asked.

El Zurrido cursed. He wanted his victims to quail. He believed that at last he would get even with the youth who had taken him to jail, with the gallows in the near background.

"You get nothing. Only the poison fangs in your flesh. Then you will die slowly, rolling about, tied up. Pedro will watch you. He will be back, after we are gone, to see you are still in position. If, in your fear, you manage to writhe away, he will put you back. Adios, gringo. Come, we go! Place him first. Watch the shadow of the stick, gringo, listen to the drip of the water, wait for the snake to come out, wait for its fangs to strike you. It has never failed."

They set the Kid in front of the cage door and trooped out. He heard their spurs clinking on the rock.

He watched them go, eager to loot Mejilla.

But Pedro would not come back.

IV.

There was one thing they had failed to do. They should have notched the ends of the stick they set beneath his knees, connected the ropes. It gave the Kid a hope, a faint one, that became fainter as he painfully rolled from side to side and strove to drive the stick through the bonds.

At last it began to shift, to the right, but the can was filling up, the shadow of the stick was shortening, the sun was beating down upon the snake.

The Kid knew a rattler liked to bask a while in the sun. But too much heat was deadly. And it would avenge its discomfort upon anything within reach.

Through repeated efforts the Kid worked the stick close to his right knee, and there it stayed while the rattler, anxious to escape the sun, buzzed its growing rage.

The water dripped on, the shadow lessened. The Kid, exhausted by his endeavors, saw the end of the walking beam quiver, knew what it meant. The balance was almost even; in a few moments the can would swing down, the door of the cage open and free the vicious rattle that all this time had been smelling the Kid, associating him with its discomfort.

It spurred him on to a final supreme effort. The stick slid, slipped at last. The Kid's bound arms came over his knees, and he tore at the knots with his teeth, racing against death, his life reckoned by seconds.

His wrists were free, and he worked at his ankle bonds, loosened them so that he could stand up, move out of the way as the snake came gliding out, angry and vicious. The Kid was stiff and faint, but he was able to dodge it.

He could have killed it with a rock, but he let it go. He was after the real Zurrido, not his namesake.

They had taken his six-gun. There was the rifle at the foot of the cliff, but it might have been damaged in its fall, and it was not the sort of weapon he preferred. He had tossed the hogleg of the sniper into the brush. He could find that.

He had to get to town ahead of Zurrido and his men to warn the citizens. Better still, overtake El Zurrido.

He was wary about the ladders, though he did not think the triggered one had been reset. El Zurrido had been too sure of him.

He found the sniper still bound and gagged, although he had managed to squirm on his back. The Kid found the six-gun. It was a

Colt .45, and the Kid felt better as he hefted it. It did not fit his hand as well as his own hogleg, but it was a good enough weapon.

The sniper glared up at him.

"You see, I came back, amigo," said the Kid. "I'll be back again later on, if we're lucky, you an' me."

Out on the plain, the Kid saw two moving dust clouds.

One was coming toward the mesa, the other leaving it. The first was the posse, the second El Zurrido and his outlaws. The mounts were fresh, those of the posse tired.

The Kid believed that Speed had the pace of all of them, could overhaul El Zurrido.

While he wondered why the posse did not suspect the cause of the other dust cloud, he saw their own cloud veer as they swung off at an angle to investigate.

The Kid found Speed waiting, impatient to go, knowing well that action was at hand.

He swung to the saddle, taking yet another angle toward where El Zurrido spurred ahead of his followers, eager for revenge upon the town.

El Zurrido saw the dust cloud shift its course toward him. He supposed the posse had either sighted him or that they had lost trail and were turning back to town. But he would get there ahead of their winded horses, strike swiftly, and be away.

He was all washed up with the county, and he burned to make a final clean-up, to strike out for fresh pastures. It would take only a few minutes to hold up the bank, the general store.

By this time, he told himself, the range dick would have felt the strike of the big snake, know the venom flowing in his veins, then coagulating while numbness crept over him, clutched at his heart and brain.

They swept over a rise, down into a draw. The dust of the posse was lost to view. They struck another slope and went loping up it. At the top, El Zurrido glanced back once more.

There was dust, coming on fast, but it was the dust of a single rider. One of the posse, El Zurrido told himself, must be magnificently mounted. But its rider was reckless to come on alone.

El Zurrido called to his men: "Go ahead! I'll take this fool."

He swung the big roan about, galloped toward the lone horseman, hoping it might be the deputy who had jailed him. Then he would be able to complete his score of vengeance.

The dust thinned as the riders neared each other. El Zurrido saw a buckskin horse, mounted by a rider who seemed one with his mount. Then the outlaw recognized the rider.

He did not trust his eyes for a moment. It was impossible that this could be Prentiss, of the C. A., left behind, tied and helpless, at the mercy of the rattlesnake. The youth who had once before taken him, and who came on now with an implacable resolution in every motion of man and horse.

Superstitious dread gripped El Zurrido. It seemed to him that his fate was overtaking him, this time for a final reckoning. He shook off the fear and charged in, flinging lead. His roan was the heavier. He would try and bowl the buckskin over if his bullets did not kill the range dick.

Through the drifting wisps of smoke from the muzzle of his gun

he saw the Kid's hawkish features, his dark eyes, resolute and filled with high courage.

Fear again possessed him. The marrow in his spine seemed to change to water. And then he saw the Kid reel in his saddle, just as a slug gouged El Zurrido's head just above one ear. A half inch inside and it would have gone through his brain. El Zurrido did not realize that if the Kid had been using his own hogleg that would have been the end of the story.

The Kid was hit in the shoulder. The top of his sleeve began to show crimson, but the bone was not shattered. He regained his seat and fired again. He saw El Zurrido fling up his arms and fall from his saddle, lying on the ground with one hand above his heart, his six-gun tossed aside.

The roan galloped off, swung toward its comrades. They had halted, awaiting the outcome of the fight. They were not feeling too resolute. The dust of the posse, coming up in a final burst of speed, was getting too close for ease of mind.

The Kid reined in, swung a leg over the cantle and slid to the ground. He had not been sure he scored the second time with the strange, off-balance hogleg until he saw El Zurrido fall.

He had wanted to take him in alive, but a dead outlaw such as El Zurrido was better than no outlaw.

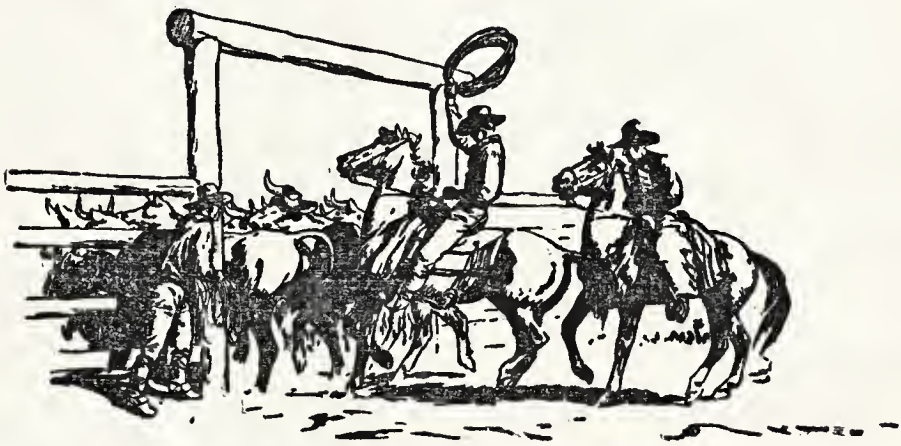
The posse came up, passed him, in full cry after the rest of the band. At least they would not surprise the town.

El Zurrido's face was crimson, but he was not dead. He resorted to trickery. The fingers of his right hand twitched as the Kid bent over him. They closed on a derringer in a special coat holster, and the small pistol, deadly enough at close range, spat viciously as the Kid kicked it out of El Zurrido's hand.

"You are the devil himself!" gasped El Zurrido. "This is the second time you——"

"And the *last* time," said the Kid.

Waal, there's one rattler thet won't be doin' an awful lot o' rattlin' any more. Reckon the men in Mejilla will see to it thet he's put whar he shore can't git out till he's led out to the gallows. Read how the Whistlin' Kid gits the next hombre he goes after. Yuh'll find the story in Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly plumb soon.



The Ghost Of Tommy Rockford

By Walker Tompkins

Author of "The Haunted Bunk House," etc.

CHAPTER I.

AVALANCHE PERIL.

THE deep rumbling started high up the south shoulder of Gunsight Pass and grew rapidly in volume. A few seconds before the sound reached Tommy Rockford's ears, his thoroughbred horse had shied violently at feeling the trail shaking under its steel-shod hoofs.

"Avalanche!" cried the cowboy dick, twisting in his saddle to peer up the juniper-dotted slope across which the Gunsight Pass Trail had been worn by many hoofs. "An' we're right in the path of it, Kentuck!"

Rock slides were not unusual in the desolate mountains of northwestern Arizona. Billions of tons of boulders had clung uneasily to the roof-steep hillsides for untold centuries. The slightest shifting of a boulder under the weight of a bighorn sheep might be enough to start a landslide that could engulf a sizable valley below it.

"Burn wind, hoss!" yelled Tommy Rockford, as he saw the forward wall of bounding rock and earth a half mile above them, but descending into Gunsight Pass like a tidal wave. "We kin git out from under that slide if yuh keep yore feet!"

Rockford was southbound to Phoenix, and was therefore trailing a pack mule laden with blankets, grub, and camp utensils. The mule had gone lame farther back along

the trail, so Rockford knew he would have to sacrifice the animal and his gear, if he was to escape the oncoming avalanche which would soon wipe out all traces of the trail they were following.

Swiftly undallying the mule's lead rope from his saddle horn, Rockford gave the Kentucky horse its head. The mule, finding itself freed, stopped to nibble a tuft of grama grass, unaware that doom was pounding down the mountainside above it at terrific speed.

Rounding a curve of the mountain trail, Rockford's heart jelled within him as he saw two horsemen halted fifty yards ahead of him. They were the first human beings he had seen in four days of travel across the bad lands.

A huge lava outcrop above the trail hid out any view of the avalanche that would soon engulf the trail, so that the two riders probably thought the crashing roar of sound was probably a thunderstorm along the remote peaks.

Jerking off his gray Stetson, Tommy Rockford waved frantically and pointed up the slope.

"Avalanche comin'!" he yelled at the top of his lungs. "Turn yore broncs an' high-tail it fer yore lives! Hurry!"

The two riders had jerked rein and were staring at the rider who was galloping recklessly along the narrow ledge toward them. Then, catching his words, they wheeled their broncs swiftly and gouged in the spurs.

Kentucky rapidly overtook the fleeing men. As he did so, Tommy Rockford saw the rearmost pony suddenly stumble on the loose rubble which carpeted the trail. Horse and rider went down heavily, their speed carrying them over the trail's edge and sprawling them down the steep slope. By sheer luck they brought up with a crash on a juniper clump sufficiently big to check their slide.

The other rider, a burly hombre on a paint horse, glanced over his shoulder at his companion's plight, then at the rock slide which was roaring down the mountain above. Without checking his pinto's stride to help the other man, he leaned lower over the horn and spurred for more speed.

"Whoa, Kentuck!" Rockford slid his thoroughbred to a halt and dived from the saddle, almost before he knew he had done so.

Down the slope he raced, to where the unhorsed rider was dizzily getting to his feet. One glance at his bronc, lying against the smashed-over juniper scrub, showed Rockford its leg was broken.

"Grab my hand an' climb fast, amigo!" yelled Rockford, as he looked into the scared white face of a youth in his late teens. "Hurry —mebbe we kin reach my hoss an' vamose in time!"

White with horror, the young hombre scrambled up the slope with the help of Rockford's powerful arm. The cowboy dick leaped aboard Kentucky's saddle and had spurred the horse into a run before the man he had rescued had got firmly seated behind him.

Whooom! A boulder as big as a house whizzed over the trail in front of them, the breath of its passage slapping Rockford's cheek like a whip. Kentucky bunched his hoofs and leaped the gash in the trail and raced madly on.

"We're too late—the avalanche has got us!"

Rockford groaned the words as he saw a sprawling side arm of the rock slide bound across the trail twenty yards ahead. And then he saw that

a huge granite formation up the slope had split the avalanche in two parts, and that they would be safe in the spreading V of protected slope beneath the outcrop.

Kentucky jounced to a halt, snorting with fear. The earth shook and the air was slamming their ears with terrific sound. Rockford twisted in the saddle to survey the deadly trail behind them.

For a strip two hundred yards wide, the mountainside was sprawling downward at express-train speed. A dense cloud of dust was lifting to obscure the sky. Rockford got a glimpse of his pack mule snapped under the steam roller of rumbling earth and rock, crushed like a bug under a heel.

Rocks whistled over their heads like bullets, but the granite outcrop had spared their lives, plunging the main force of the avalanche behind them.

In mute awe, Rockford and the youth he had rescued stared down at the spot where the kid's writhing horse was engulfed under the sprawl of bounding débris. The mountain pass slope was gouged clean of surface soil and shrubbery and was piling itself in a great, boiling mass of smoking confusion down in the V-shaped pit of Gunsight Pass.

Slowly the thunder of the avalanche gave way to echoes which fled off down the far-flung reaches of the pass. Finally silence came, but their ears were still ringing.

"Yuh saved my life, mister!" panted the kid, sliding off Kentucky's rump and reaching up to shake Tommy's hand. "I—I'd never 'a' made it on foot without you riskin' yore hide tuh save mine. I cain't ever repay yuh."

Rockford grinned and dismounted to give Kentucky a rest after his hard sprint. The West's ace railway dick was only a few years older than the youth he confronted.

Tommy was dressed in the simple garb of a man of the cow country—gray sombrero, blue shirt with red bandanna about the neck, flaring batwing chaps of chocolate-colored bull hide, and kangaroo boots with big-roweled spurs buckled above high heels.

Cartridge-laden belts looped his waist and supported oak-tanned holsters. The Colt .45s which Rockford packed were plated with gold. He had taken them from a bandit king he had once brought to justice, and they were the mates of his famous gold-plated handcuffs that had never lost a prisoner during his career.

"My name's Ote Halsey," said the freckle-faced kid. "What's——"

Halsey broke off with his eyes widening in horror as he stared off ahead of them. Frowning with curiosity, Rockford glanced up—in time to see stark tragedy.

The kid's older companion on the pinto was trotting back in their direction, toward the point where the trail was piled heavy with loose rock hurled there when the granite outcrop divided the full force of the avalanche.

Even as they looked, a mammoth boulder tottered from its perch amid the rocks higher up, and bounded down to smash the pinto's neck and shoulders.

"Look!" yelled Halsey in terror. "They're both done fer!"

Rockford gasped in equal despair. The rider who had been Halsey's companion had been hurled from the pinto's saddle, and even now both rider and mangled horse were rolling and sliding down the slope of Gunsight Pass.

"You stay hyar, Ote. I'm ridin' down tuh ketch up with yore pard

if I kin!" cried Rockford, vaulting into the saddle. "That boulder killed his bronc, but might not 'a' hurt yore pard."

Spurring at a dizzy angle down the slope below the trail level, Rockford kept his eyes on the somersaulting carcass of the horse and the sprawling, skidding figure of the man. Then the cowboy dick winced with horror as he saw the rolling hombre suddenly plunge from sight into one of the rock-walled defiles which gashed the shoulder of Gunsight Pass. The horse went tumbling on toward the bottom of the valley, dwindling in the distance till it resembled a grotesque bug.

"That pore jigger might 'a' fell only a couple o' feet—or mebbe it was fifty!" groaned Rockford, as he balanced himself in the saddle. "The best I kin hope for is that he won't be dead. He'll shore be skinned up aplenty!"

Kentucky bunched steel-shod hoofs into the loose gravel and finally skidded to a dusty halt, a few feet from the rim of the black opening into which the rider had vanished. Rockford dismounted shakily and scrambled on hands and knees to the edge of the barranca. Dust obscured the air as he looked down.

"Too late. He's dead as a tick in sheep dip."

Rockford removed his sombrero as he saw the sprawled form of the rider, twenty feet below. The head was crushed beyond recognition from having crashed into a projecting rock somewhere along its mad slide.

Going back to Kentucky, Rockford unbuckled his lariat coil. Tying one end of it around a boulder near the brink of the defile, he lowered the rawhide rope over the edge, and then let himself down hand-over-hand until his boots touched bottom.

He found the man's dusty body scratched and scuffed by its long roll down the mountainside. The face was crushed beyond any hope of recognizing it, but Rockford judged that the rider had been an hombre of about his own age.

The corpse was dressed in a red hunting shirt and brown Angora chaps. The twin gun holsters had been thonged down at the tips. One .45 was missing as a result of the slide, but Rockford saw, with a shock of surprise, that the backstrap of the other Colt had eleven notches filed in the steel.

"Yuh suppose this gent could have been an owl-hooter?" he mused. "If so, I wonder if that button, Ote Halsey, is ridin' outside the law, too?"

Going through the dead man's pockets, Rockford found a grimy envelope marked "To Coyote Flinders, boss of the Black Bunch. From the Utah Kid."

Rockford's brows knitted. "Coyote" Flinders and the Black Bunch! Flinders was probably the most "wanted" rustler in the border States, and the Black Bunch was a gang of bandits who for years had evaded sheriffs and Arizona Rangers.

"Reckon as a lawman I got a right tuh open this."

Ripping open the envelope, Tommy drew out a letter, written on the back of a whisky-bottle label in a crude scrawl. It read:

DEAR COYOTE: This will interdooce Sam Collier, that I told you about. Sam's probly the best shot in Arizona with hand guns or rifle. You kin trust him to handle that Bar Slash rustlin job single-handed. I'll be waitin at Bitter Crick fer you fellers to show up. Sam here will make a plum good addition to our Black Bunch, you kin bank on that. THE UTAH KID.

Tommy Rockford folded the letter and put it in his pocket. He squatted beside the corpse several minutes, looking at the grim notches on Collier's gun butt—every notch a dead man.

"So yo're the famous gunman, Sam Collier!" mused Rockford. "Funny that it took a stray boulder tuh end yore career o' crime!"

CHAPTER II.

HIDDEN COW CAMP.

ROCKFORD finally stood up, got a grip on his lariat rope, and climbed laboriously back to the rim of the defile. As he scrambled out on the rim rock and untied his rope from the boulder which had served as anchor, he saw Ote Halsey coming down the slope toward him.

"Yo're too late, son!" panted the cowboy dick, wiping sweat from his dust-grimed forehead. "His head was smashed, an' he died instantly, pore feller."

Halsey's freckled face paled as he peered over the brink and down to Collier's grotesquely sprawled body. When he looked up, it was to find Tommy Rockford's slitted gray eyes studying him.

"This hombre yore trail pardner, Ote?" asked Rockford, trying to make the question sound casual as he reached in his shirt pocket for a bag of tobacco and brown cigarette papers.

Halsey hesitated, then shook his head. "Didn't even know the feller," he mumbled. "I jest met him on the trail, a couple minutes afore you dashed around the bend a-hollerin' 'Avalanche!' He—he told me he was a stranger in this part o' the kentry."

Rockford shook tobacco into the paper and drew the pouch string tight with his teeth. He was relieved at Halsey's answer. Evidently the kid was unaware that the man he had encountered on the trail a few moments before was one of the most desperate gunmen in the border country.

"We goin' tuh bury him?" asked Halsey. "If we leave him hyar, he'll git gnawed by coyotes an' buzzard hawks."

Rockford lighted his browny. "That feller," he said quietly, "is Sam Collier, the famous young gunman from Tombstone. Therefore, as soon as I reaches Silverville, I'm notifyin' the sheriff. He kin do what he sees fit with the body, seein' as how Sam Collier carried a reward on his scalp."

"Sam Collier!" The youth whispered as if fearful of speaking the gun hawk's name aloud. "Gosh! An' I was goin' tuh—tuh lead him tuh my camp an' feed him!"

The two hombres toiled back up to the trail. Rockford paused, adjusting the reins.

"You kin call me Tommy, son," he said thoughtfully, in answer to Halsey's unspoken question. "I'm jest a buckaroo from Phoenix."

Halsey stirred uneasily, his eyes on the far horizon.

"I'm a mile from my camp," he said. "Yuh mind if I straddle yore bronc until yuh drap me off? An' yo're welcome tuh put on the nose bag with us Bar Slash boys, if yuh want to."

Rockford was thoughtful, as they mounted and started heading west, picking their way cautiously over the loose earth until they got to solid trail again.

Halsey's statement that he was a Bar Slash cowprod was interesting. The note which Sam Collier had been carrying to the chief of the Black Bunch hinted vaguely that

the rustler gang was planning some sort of raid on the Bar Slash Ranch.

"Whar was yuh bound fer when the avalanche come?" asked Tommy, as the trail dropped rapidly as it neared the point where Gunsight Pass broke through the cliffs onto the level cow range.

"I was aimin' tuh spend the mornin' huntin' goats," said the young waddy. "A bunch of us Bar Slash hands are camped down on the Yavapai, scourin' the draws an' bottom-land brush fer strays. The home ranch is forty mile north o' hyar, through Bearcat Canyon."

A half hour later, they were down on the bottomlands of the Yavapai River, and Halsey was directing Rockford through the thick salt cedars and cottonwood thickets to where the Bar Slash outfit was encamped.

"Yore foreman with yuh, Ote?" asked Rockford, as they finally broke through a hedge of willow growth and saw a tent pitched back in the chaparral. "I'd lione tuh talk with him."

Halsey shook his head. "Nope," he said. "Jest a few odd cowpokes, Tommy."

They dismounted near the tent. Farther back in the brush in a natural corral, the cowboy dick noticed several horses with rawhide hobbles on their legs. Tommy Rockford got a distinct feeling that the cow camp had been deliberately hidden, and the hunch made his pulse stir with uneasiness.

The canvas fly of the tent pushed out to reveal an ugly-faced hombre with a .45-70 rifle in his hands.

"Howdy, Ote!" gruffed the hombre, his red-rimmed eyes staring at Rockford. "Yuh met him O. K., huh?"

Halsey laughed nervously as he clapped a hand on Rockford's shoulder and led him toward the surly-voiced man by the tent.

"This ranny is named Tommy, from Phoenix!" said the kid in a nervous voice. "He saved my life an hour back, when a avalanche practically blocked Gunsight Pass. Tommy, shake with one o' the Bar Slash hoss wranglers, Kak Sleimer."

Rockford frowned slightly as he took Sleimer's hairy paw in his own grasp. Sleimer's surprised expression started a warning bell to tinkling faintly somewhere back in his brain, for obviously Sleimer had expected Ote Halsey to bring some one else back.

"Howdy, Kak!" returned Rockford. "The kid said as how I might be able tuh git a snack o' bait, an' then dust along tuh Silverville. I lost my pack hoss an' bed roll in the avalanche."

Without answering the cowboy, "Kak" Sleimer turned to Ote Halsey, who was ill at ease for some reason which Rockford could not fathom. The cowboy dick dropped palms to gun belts.

"See anything o' Sam on the trail?" Sleimer asked the kid.

Rockford stiffened as he heard the name. Were they talking about Collier, the dead outlaw? He saw Halsey swallow once, then answer steadily:

"Nary a sign, Kak. The avalanche wiped out the trail, so I reckon Sam will have trouble gittin' hyar when he does show up."

Thoughts churned in Rockford's head. He was beginning to wonder whether this was a Bar Slash cow camp or not. Why had Ote Halsey failed to mention the tragic death of the stranger he said he had met on the trail, while out goat hunting?

"What may be yore last name, Tommy?" demanded Kak Sleimer

abruptly. "It wouldn't be Rockford, would it?"

The cowboy dick turned to face Kak Sleimer, and instead caught the full impact of Sleimer's knotted fist square on the point of his jaw.

The mule-kick punch sprawled Rockford on his back before he could reach his gun butts. A shower of hot stars blinded his vision. Dimly his ears caught Ote Halsey's cry:

"Why'd yuh slug this rannihan, Kak? He don't know nothin'. He just rescued me from that avalanche an' give me a ride hyar."

Kak Sleimer leaned his rifle against the tent pole and squatted down beside Rockford's stirring form. The cowboy dick was dimly aware that his gold-plated Colt .45s were being removed roughly from their holsters.

"This jasper yuh brung tuh our camp happens tuh be a lawman, Ote!" snarled Kak Sleimer. "A plumb pizen John Law. He was pointed out tuh me once down in Phoenix. His name's Tommy Rockford, an' for all we know he might 'a' been trailin' Sam Collier hyar!"

CHAPTER III.

DEATH TRAILS ROCKFORD.

SLEIMER'S rough paws rolled the stunned lawman over on his back, and drew his arms together painfully. Then, with a lariat rope, Sleimer knotted Rockford's wrists tightly together.

"I—I swear I didn't know he was a tin-star!" husked out Ote Halsey, staring down at the dazed prisoner with fear mirrored in his eyes. "But yuh shouldn't 'a' socked him. He'd have et with us, an' then ridden on tuh Silverville, none the wiser!"

Rockford sat up dizzily and waggled his jaw from side to side, wondering if Sleimer's uppercut had fractured the bone. He had fallen into the clutches of an outlaw bunch, he was now positive. To think that the innocent-looking younker, Ote Halsey, had been the means of his downfall was bitter medicine to swallow.

"Coyote an' the boys are over in Bearcat Canyon butcherin' a beef," grunted Sleimer, as he tossed Rockford's gilded Peacemakers into the tent. "Mebbe the boss will want tuh pump Rockford about the whereabouts o' Sam Collier, afore we salivate him."

Rockford's senses were slowly clearing, giving way to a feeling of total despair. Without doubt, he had been captured by the dreaded Black Bunch. He had never heard of the famous rustling gang working so far north before, but it was easy to see that Sam Collier had been riding to this very camp.

"I kin watch the prisoner, if you want tuh ride over an' git the boss, Kak!" volunteered Ote Halsey. "He'll shore want tuh kill Tommy Rockford, an' I hope tuh blazes he lets me do the job, fer bein' so dumb as tuh bring a lawman intuh the Black Bunch camp that a way."

Rockford's eyes blazed dull hatred at the smooth-faced young rustler who had revealed himself as a gun-toting member of the Black Bunch killer crew. Only one thing still puzzled the cowboy dick: Why Ote Halsey had failed to mention the fact that Sam Collier was dead, back in Gunsight Pass.

"O. K., Ote," said Kak Sleimer. "I'll shag over tuh Bearcat an' bring back the bunch. Meanwhile, you ride close herd on this Rockford hairpin, Ote. He's pizen as a sidewinder."

Halsey nodded and patted his cedar-butted Colt meaningly.

"Don't worry about that, Kak!" he promised. "I'll hammer Rockford into a pulp if he gits boogery."

Kak Sleimer picked up a saddle from the shady side of the tent and went out into the brush corral to rig a *grulla* mare. Rockford, his eyes still dull with pain, saw the crook mount and spur back into the camp.

"You better be saddlin' up a bronc tuh ride when we gits back, Ote!" instructed Sleimer. "Sam Collier's due some time to-day in Gunsight Pass, an' with the trail wiped out he's got more need than ever fer you tuh meet him."

So saying, Sleimer galloped off through the brush.

Rockford writhed helplessly in his bonds as he saw the treacherous Ote Halsey saddling up a roan pony. He returned to camp and went up to his prisoner, his face sober.

"Of all the double-crossin' skunks," snarled Rockford, "you take the arsenic cake, Halsey. You was out on that trail waitin' fer Sam Collier tuh show up so you could guide him hyar tuh yore thievin' Black Bunch, blast yuh, an'——"

Halsey lifted a hand to silence the lawman's angry outburst.

"I admit all yuh say, Rockford!" confessed Halsey. "But don't slip yore cinch till I tell yuh somethin'. In a few minutes, Kak Sleimer will be back with a dozen long-lopers, includin' Coyote Flinders, our boss."

As he spoke, Halsey took a jackknife from his pocket.

"Thar ain't a chance in ten million but what they'll murder yuh an' toss yore carcass tuh the catfish in Yavapai Crick. The Black Bunch rode three hundred miles tuh git tuh the Bar Slash range, Rockford, an' they're plannin' the biggest rustlin' job ever pulled in Arizona. They figger tuh ambush every member o' the Bar Slash crew, an' then rustle their whole herd o' beef stuff!"

Rockford's jaws grated helplessly. He knew that Halsey was talking freely for the reason that Rockford would not live long enough to profit by the secret information.

"But I owe you a big debt fer savin' my life tuh-day, Rockford!" were the kid's next surprising words. "It took guts tuh do what you did, an' I aim tuh pay yuh back—hyar an' now!"

With the words, Ote Halsey opened the jackknife and calmly severed the lariat which bound Tommy Rockford's wrists behind him.

"You must be on the level," panted the cowboy dick, as he rubbed his raw, chafed wrists. "Else yuh wouldn't do this. But how come yuh didn't tell Sleimer about Collier's death?"

Halsey shrugged, his freckled face serious. "At first, I didn't want tuh talk too much in front o' you," he said. "An'—an' after Kak hit yuh, I—I decided tuh quit the Black Bunch fer keeps, Rockford. I ain't really bad, even though I ride with them thieves. I was a hungry orphant when they picked me up."

Rockford ducked inside the tent to recover his gold-plated six-guns. As he holstered them, he met Halsey's contorted face.

"I'm surrenderin' tuh yuh, Rockford!" the kid said in a steely whisper. "The Black Bunch will be back any minute now, so we got tuh fork our broncs an' high-tail it tuh Silverville. My life wouldn't be worth a plugged peso if I stayed hyar. If —if we makes a git-away, then yuh kin arrest me."

Rockford ran for his Kentucky horse, and the two men mounted together and spurred out along the river bank toward the trail which

led out of Gunsight Pass on its way to the county seat.

"If you give me yore word tuh go straight from now on, Ote," Rockford vowed, as they spurred into a gallop, "I'll fergit you ever seen the Black Bunch, son. You ain't the only kid that's made a wrong start in life, but who's got good stuff underneath."

Even as the choked-up youth tried to speak, a rifle bullet whined sharply over their heads.

"Coyote Flinders an' the Bunch!" screamed Halsey, gouging in his spurs. "Ride fer yore life, Tommy!"

Along the brushy plain the two rode like shots from a cannon. Out of the chaparral from the direction of Bearcat Gulch came a dozen mounted riders, all with six-guns blazing lead and smoke.

They had spotted Halsey's race for freedom, and even as Tommy Rockford sent Kentucky skyrocketing toward the Silverville trail he saw that the Black Bunch were riding at an angle that would cut them off from escape down the valley.

"We got tuh head back toward Gunsight Pass!" yelled Rockford desperately. "They've got our path blocked!"

Brrrang! Bang-bang-bang! Brr-ram! Lead whistled in a deadly sleet on all sides of the two fugitive horsemen as they swung their speeding broncs frantically to the east, making for the trail that sloped upward into the mouth of Gunsight Pass.

All other avenues of escape were cut off, and both men realized that even Gunsight Pass offered no refuge, for the avalanche had cut off their trail.

"The best we kin hope tuh do is hole up an' pepper 'em with slugs!" yelled Ote Halsey. "If we kin stand 'em off till dark, we——"

Zzzzzat! A bullet whined viciously and ended with a sickening smack of lead tunneling flesh.

Tommy Rockford, bent jockey fashion over Kentucky's mane, saw Ote Halsey fling up both arms and dive limply out of his saddle as a rifle bullet from the pursuing rustlers drilled him.

To stop and help the kid would be suicide, but Rockford reined Kentucky down on his haunches, wheeled, raced back toward the oncoming fan of hard-shooting riders. He leaped from the saddle alongside Ote Halsey's motionless figure, and knelt.

"Too bad. Too—danged—bad!"

Mist welled into Tommy's eyelashes as he saw the ghastly bullet wound in the back of the kid's skull. Ote Halsey's determination to make good as a law-abiding citizen was in vain.

But in the last moments of his life, Ote Halsey had atoned for the evil he had done as a member of the Black Bunch.

CHAPTER IV.

HOPELESSLY TRAPPED.

KNEELING beside Halsey's corpse, Tommy Rockford snapped a gold-plated Colt from leather and drew a quick bead on the nearest member of the oncoming Black Bunch—Kak Sleimer, whose smoking rifle proved him to be the youth's slayer.

The thundering hoofs of the bandit gang were only fifty yards away now, and with each second the distance was getting less. Bullets plucked geysers of sand on all sides of the bayed cowboy as he grimly pulled trigger.

Spang! With a hoarse yell, Kak Sleimer pitched sidewise out of the

saddle, his breastbone pierced by Rockford's slug.

Sleimer's spike-heeled boot caught in the oxbow stirrup and a moment later, his body was being kicked to hash meat under the steel-shod hind hoofs of the *grulla* mare.

The firing ceased momentarily as Coyote Flinders and his black-clad riders saw Sleimer dumped from his saddle by the lone tin-star on the trail ahead. It gave Tommy Rockford the seconds he needed to vault into Kentucky's saddle and head out toward Gunsight Pass for all he was worth.

"Give me yore last ounce o' speed, Kentuck!" begged the waddy as he flattened himself to cut wind resistance. "Thar's eleven gunslingers behind us, an' they'll foller us till the last man drops afore they quit!"

Ears laid back, glossy tail bannering, Kentucky hit the Gunsight Pass climb like a comet. The horse was making the torturous ascent at a speed which was almost miraculous for a bronc that had already been seven hours on a hard trail. But Tommy knew that the killing pace could not last for long.

Behind him, Rockford could see the eleven Black Bunch killers spurring into a single-file formation, as they raced into the trail at an angle, dust clouding behind them.

They were forced to hold their fire now, but Coyote Flinders was out in the lead, and Rockford knew that the Black Bunch were settling down to the grimmest man-hunt ride they had ever started. They could not risk failure; they would ride till they had pumped Rockford full of bullets.

Stark despair clawed at the waddy's heart as he found Kentucky hammering along the same bleak mountainside where the avalanche had scraped its dusty path of destruction, an hour before. The pall of dust still hung over the heavens as if portending Rockford's speedy doom.

"The trail's wiped out plumb complete—not even a goat could cross that smooth rock slope!" moaned the cowboy dick. "The Black Bunch has me hopelessly trapped—an' out in the open."

It was true. The rock slide had not left even a boulder or bush large enough for a quail to hide behind. Out on the desolate face of Gunsight Pass south slope, he would be an easy target for the vengeful crooks behind him.

"Guess this is whar I cash in my chips!" clipped Rockford through grating teeth. "Best I kin do is tuh try an' lop off a few o' them rattlesnakes afore they git me, I reckon!"

Coyote Flinders and the Black Bunch were gaining on Kentucky at an alarming rate. The thoroughbred's pace was beginning to break. Already trail-sore and hoof-weary, the magnificent roan could not be expected to outdistance the fresh mounts of the pursuing outlaws, even had the trail been open.

In moments of desperate emergency, some men think as clear as crystal. And now, with sure doom facing him before many seconds had ticked by, Tommy Rockford's mind suddenly conceived the most daring plan of his entire career as a railroad detective.

On his left, and some distance downhill, was the blue-black opening of the gully into which Sam Collier had rolled to his death that afternoon. That barranca now became the focal point of Rockford's attention.

"None o' the Black Bunch know that Sam Collier's body is down thar!" shot the thought through

Rockford's skull. "An' the only man who saw my face was Kak Sleimer, who's dead now. Mebbe I kin git away with it. I'm a goner, anyhow, so I ain't got a chip tuh lose!"

Rockford pulled one toe from stirrup. Then he thrust the leg forward so that his boot was wedged suddenly into the joint where Kentucky's right foreleg joined the barrel.

It was a trick used by rodeo riders when they wanted to make a horse fall while in full stride. Never had Rockford used the harmless device on Kentucky, although he knew the trick would not injure the horse except, perhaps, for a scratched muzzle. Now his very life depended on the scheme.

His leg action suddenly jammed, Kentucky stumbled. Rockford's palms leap-frogged him over the dangerous pommel as the thoroughbred pitched forward heavily, and then he felt himself catapulting through space at dizzy speed.

Bam! Tommy landed on the slope below the trail at a glancing angle which jounced the breath from his lungs, but which saved him any broken bones or serious injury.

Then he was rolling and somersaulting down the gravelly hillside, with arms and legs apparently flopping in wild confusion.

Hoarse yells of exultation swept the line of Black Bunch riders as they slowed their horses to watch the fugitive's body rolling and sliding, sprawling through dirt patches and brushing a white trail of alkali dust along his path.

"He's goin' tuh pitch over the rim rock intuh that gully!" yelled Coyote Flinders gleefully. "Reckon he'll be mashed tuh jelly if that gully's deep!"

But Tommy Rockford had carefully planned his breakneck slide down the mountain, to guide him to the barranca where Sam Collier had met his death.

In mind's eye he recalled that the upper end of the barranca was choked with cushioning weeds instead of fanglike rocks, and was only ten feet or so in depth. Toward that point he made his body roll and slide, although outwardly he appeared to be but a lifeless scarecrow tumbling down the hill.

Dizzy from the long spill, Rockford fought to hold his senses as he reached the brink of the small gulch. Then he felt himself pitching over the brink to disappear, in full view of the Black Bunch riders who had halted on the trail above just as Kentucky was getting dizzily to his feet.

Crash! Rockford landed on the heavy mattress of wiry brush which choked the upper end of the barranca.

His hurtling body broke through, but he landed on hands and knees with no hurts other than a badly bruised body and lungs that fought for air.

"Got—tuh work fast—if I make this scheme—work out!"

Scrambling downward through the weeds, Tommy Rockford came to the sprawled corpse of Sam Collier, beginning to collect insects.

Working with feverish haste, the cowboy detective stripped off his own tattered blue hickory shirt and his gravel-scuffed batwing chaps. His gun belts followed suit. Both his gold-plated .45s had spilled out of holsters during his long slide, and he had lost his hat when Kentucky took his spill.

Crowding back his distaste of handling Sam Collier's cold bulk, the waddy peeled off the dead gunman's red hunting shirt and unstrapped his brown Angora chaps.

It was but the work of a moment to clothe the battered corpse in his own discarded chaps and blue shirt, and buckle his shell belts about Collier's waist.

"They'll probably mosey down hyar tuh make shore I'm dead," Tommy panted as he knotted his red bandanna about the corpse's mangled neck. "Lucky fer me I nailed Sleimer, but since Collier's head is crushed anyhow, they won't know the difference."

The note which the "Utah Kid" had written as an introduction for Sam Collier was proof in itself that none of the Black Bunch were familiar with Collier's appearance. It was on this factor that Tommy Rockford was basing his incredible ruse, and he made certain to keep the whisky-label message in his own possession now.

Dragging Collier's disguised body back to the weeds where his own form had tumbled over the low rim rock, Tommy Rockford hurried back and donned Collier's goat-hair chaps and red shirt. Then, buckling the gun belts around his midriff, he clambered on down the file and burrowed into a thicket of brush.

"If this works," panted the cowboy dick, as he flattened himself deep in the brambly thicket, "thar ain't no reason why I can't step intuh the rôle o' Sam Collier. An' then I kin find out jest what play brought the Black Bunch three hundred miles north tuh Bar Slash range. Ote Halsey said as how they was plannin' the biggest rustlin' job they ever pulled off."

Then Rockford snapped his lips tight and cringed deeper behind the screening brush, holding his breath in suspense. For pebbles were spilling over the rim rock up the gully. That meant that one or more of the Black Bunch was coming down the hill to make sure Tommy Rockford was really dead.

CHAPTER V.

THE BLACK BUNCH.

FOR several moments after Tommy Rockford's body plummeted out of sight into the small canyon down the slope, the members of the Black Bunch sat their horses on the trail above, mutely eying the trail of dust which marked the cowboy dick's slide to what seemed certain death.

Then guns rattled one by one into holsters, and the Black Bunch grinned. They were a vicious-looking lot, all killers with rewards posted on their scalps from dozens of county sheriffs throughout Arizona and New Mexico. Four were Mexicans. All wore black costumes from sombreros to boots.

The leader, Coyote Flinders, enjoyed the evil reputation of being the king of rustlers.

"One o' you boys dab yore loop on Rockford's cayuse thar," ordered Flinders, as he climbed out of the saddle. "That's the best piece o' hossflesh I ever seen in my life, an' I aims tuh use that thoroughbred myself. Meanwhile, I'm takin' a *pasear* down the hill tuh make shore Rockford is croaked. It's lucky fer us that Kak Sleimer knowed who he was."

Flinders headed off down the roof-steep expanse, clinging to scrub brush or small boulders to keep from sliding too fast. He was zigzagging his way in the general direction of the barranca where Tommy Rockford had disappeared.

Flinders's hair was flaming red, as was the stubble which furred his jowls and chin. He wore the black

hat, shirt and chaps of the Black Bunch. The six-guns thonged down at either thigh were triggerless, and their knurled hammers were worn smooth and shiny from much use.

A few minutes later, Flinders had reached the edge of the gulch which bore the track of Rockford's dizzy slide. Had the boss of the outlaw gang chanced to inspect the rim rock thirty feet farther away he might have seen other footprints and hoof marks to rouse his suspicion; but as it was, his snake-bright eyes were focused on the sprawled human form down in the brushy bottom of the draw.

"Rockford's dead, all right!" commented Flinders, as he saw the crushed skull. "Them chaps an' that shirt shore look like they took plenty o' punishment. But I'll still have the privilege o' hammerin' jest one slug through the briskit o' that lawman."

Callously, Flinders took a triggerless Colt from its scabbard and thumbed a bullet into the dead man below.

Then, in the act of heading back up to the trail to rejoin his men, Coyote Flinders made his way to the extreme head of the barranca where the gully was shallow, and crawled down inside.

"I've heard it said that Tommy Rockford carries a pair o' gold-plated handcuffs with him!" he muttered. "What a souvenir they'll be tuh show the Black Bunch!"

Arriving at the corpse, Flinders pulled open the flap of Tommy Rockford's chaps pocket. Reaching inside, the bandit chief drew forth a pair of glittering yellow handcuffs, joined by a single link on which was etched the name "Thomas H. Rockford, Phoenix, Arizona."

"This definitely proves that Sleimer wa'n't mistaken in sayin' this was Tommy Rockford!" chuckled Flinders, as he pocketed the manacles and climbed back out of the gully. "Tuh think that Ote Halsey was plannin' tuh double-cross us an' let a badge-toter escape!"

Two points of sunlight glinting on metal objects caused Flinders to detour in his slow climb back up the mountainside. His curiosity was rewarded by finding first one and then the other of Tommy Rockford's handsome gold-plated .45s. Neither of the two Peacemakers had been damaged by their fall out of the cowboy dick's holsters.

"In addition tuh usin' Rockford's pony, I reckon I'll use these flashy hoglegs from hyar on out!" decided the king of rustlers. "Everything will be perfect, now, pervidin' Sam Collier shows up an' helps us grab that herd o' Bar Slash cattle."

Panting heavily from his exertion, Coyote Flinders rejoined his black-clad henchmen up on the trail. They had caught Kentucky, and one of the Mexicans was holding the nervous thoroughbred's bit.

"Tommy Rockford's head was bashed in," reported Flinders briefly. "I got his gold-plated handcuffs an' guns tuh show yuh when we gits back tuh camp."

With westering sunlight striking them full in the eyes, the Black Bunch headed slowly back to their secret camp on the banks of the Yavapai. Their hearts were merry and their rough voices lifted in a song of triumph.

Every outlaw on the Western frontier coveted the distinction of being the one who would finally send the noted Tommy Rockford to his death. The only thing that marred the day, in Flinders's mind, was the fact that the railway dick had been

killed by his fall, and not from the flaming guns of the Black Bunch.

"I'd give a lot tuh know why Rockford was in this part o' Arizona tuh-day," mused Flinders, as the gang paused to dig a grave for the mass of human wreckage that had been Kak Sleimer, finally kicked loose of the entangling stirrup. "It ain't likely that he knew the Black Bunch was up this far north, we've kept it so close a secret."

Their job of grave-digging finished, the outlaws next proceeded to drag Ote Halsey's body to the river and dump it into the rippling blue water. None of them had the slightest qualms in seeing the kid rustler's finish; to them, he had been a traitor.

"Besides, Tommy Rockford's job is bein' a railway dick an' so he spends most o' his time chasin' train robbers," went on Flinders. "So why would he be chasin' us? The sheriff o' Yavapai County kin worry about that; Rockford wouldn't."

One of the Mexican rustlers came forth with a theory: "But thees Señor Sam Collier—he ees a *muy malo* train *bandido*," he pointed out. "Mebbe thees Rockford hombre ees trailin' Sam Collier, not knowing Señor Collier was meetin' us *aqui*, no?"

The outlaw chief removed his Stetson and rubbed his flaming shock of hair uncertainly.

"I wish the Utah Kid was hyar now," he said. "Utah knows Sam Collier and could tell us whether or not Tommy Rockford had arrested Collier lately. But the Utah Kid is goin' tuh wait for us down at Bitter Crick."

Back at camp, the Black Bunch unsaddled and led their broncs to the secret corral, among them Kentucky, the spirited thoroughbred.

"We cain't rustle that Bar Slash herd until Collier gits hyar," growled Flinders. "So we'll wait."

The outlaws turned their attention to cooking their supper. The sun sank in a riot of color off across the mountain crags, and a cool dusk settled over the bottom land where the Black Bunch was in hiding.

They had picked the south end of Bearcat Canyon because they were lying in wait for the Bar Slash trail herd to come down from the northern range. As Ote Halsey had said, it would be the biggest rustling job in the history of Arizona; but for certain reasons known to the Black Bunch, the success of the attack would depend on the arrival and cooperation of the master gunman, Collier.

"*Hola!*" cried one of the Mexicans, as the gang was assembling around the camp fire, an hour later, to eat. "Somebody's sure coming, amigos!"

Instantly the Black Bunch snapped grimly to attention. All thoughts of hunger forgotten, they dropped hands to Colt stocks and peered off through the twilight haze, to where a lone man limped his way tiredly through the brush in their direction.

As he came closer, the outlaws saw a bright-red hunting shirt torn in dozens of places, and hairy brown Angora chaparajos on a pair of saddle-bowed legs. The newcomer threw up a hand in greeting.

"*Buenos noches*, gents!" he called out in a tired, hoarse voice. "I smelled yore smoke, an' figgered it was a camp. Any chance fer a stranger from down south tuh bed down hyar fer the night? I had an accident back up the pass an' lost my bronc, pack horse an' soogans."

The Black Bunch exchanged

glances. The stranger was in the glare of ruddy firelight, now, and they could see his face, young and clean-cut, but harsh with lines of fatigue.

Flinders spoke in a low voice through the corner of his mouth:

"I got a hunch this is Sam Collier, boys. But it might be a roamin' Bar Slash cowprod. So be ready tuh unlimber yore irons."

Flinders advanced to meet the red-shirted stranger.

"Hoofed it hyar from Gunsight, huh?" grunted the rustler chief. "Was it that avalanche?"

The stranger nodded.

"You wouldn't by any chance be the Utah Kid, would yuh?" asked Flinders craftily. If this man was Sam Collier, Flinders knew the name of the "Utah Kid" would tip Collier off that this was the Black Bunch he was seeking. If it was a stranger, then the question would rouse no suspicions.

"Naw, I ain't the Utah Kid," laughed the stranger, in a voice which seemed to reflect intense relief. "But I see I'm at the right place, lucky fer me. I got a message writ by the Kid—which you kin have if yore name is Flinders!"

Flinders nodded, and took the grimy sheet of folded paper which the young stranger produced from a frayed pocket of his red shirt. Opening it, the Black Bunch leader read it aloud.

Flinders crumpled the note and tossed it into the camp fire.

"So yo're Sam Collier, the gun wizard, eh?" he said, after an ominous pause during which the stranger returned his gaze without flinching an eyelash. "Yo're younger than we figgered Sam Collier would be. So the Black Bunch ain't acceptin' you as Sam Collier until yuh prove it!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE JOB OF SAM COLLIER.

TOMMY ROCKFORD felt his heart stop beating with anxiety, but his face did not show any sign of inward emotion as he heard Coyote Flinders challenge his identity as Sam Collier.

Behind the outlaw boss, ten Black Bunch killers stood with alert trigger fingers caressing steel that could blast him into eternity at a signal from their leader.

But he had gone too far to back out now; he was in the lion's den. He would have to go through with his desperate rôle, even though the letter from the Utah Kid had failed to satisfy Flinders. He knew his life depended on his next actions.

"I don't blame yuh fer wantin' proof, Coyote!" he said, stooping to pick up a rusty tin can and a sandy clod underfoot. "I suppose yuh've heard that the name o' Sam Collier stands fer fast an' accurate shootin'? Then watch this!"

As he uttered the words, Tommy Rockford tossed the tin can and the clod high in air.

Then his right hand stabbed down to the single notched gun in his battered holster. Blued steel winked in the firelight glow, and then ribbons of flame spat twice from the up-tilted muzzle.

Brrrang! The soaring clod burst into powder like a clay pigeon before a charge of buckshot.

Brram! The tin can, plummeting earthward from the top of its arc, was knocked into air again as a bullet pierced it.

Bang! Brram-bang-bang! Shooting with easy rhythm, Tommy Rockford kept the tin can dancing in air until the last cartridge in the cylinder had exploded. Then the riddled piece of shapeless tin clat-

tered down before the astounded, gaping outlaws.

"Yuh kin call me Sam Collier if yuh wants," challenged Tommy Rockford, as he coolly ejected fired shells from the six-gun, "or yuh kin all go tuh blazes, fer all I care!"

Wide grins replaced the savage suspicion on the faces of the Black Bunch killers. Coyote Flinders shot out a hand.

"Put 'er there, Collier!" he boomed. "Welcome tuh the Black Bunch. We knowed danged well anybody the Utah Kid would rustle up for us would be cut the right way o' the leather. Yuh cain't blame us fer wantin' tuh make shore yuh was really Collier. But from what the Utah Kid told us afore he went south tuh locate you, nobody in the world could shoot like that but you, Collier."

Rockford's grin mirrored his inner relief as the members of the Black Bunch crowded around, slapping him on the back and wringing his hand.

Their names as they introduced themselves made the cowboy dick's heart race like a trip hammer, for all were crooks on the wanted list of every sheriff's office in the West. Coyote Flinders had surrounded himself with the cream of the outlaw crop.

"We was jest gittin' ready fer chow when yuh come, Collier," said Flinders. "Get yoreself a tin pan an' cup an' jine us."

The gang began eating, coffee being poured from a huge kettle over the fire, while a pot was passed around in which floated big chunks of beef from the steer they had killed that afternoon over in Bearcat Canyon, boiled in a stew of onions and spuds and carrots.

"We sent the railway dick, Tommy Rockford, tuh the happy huntin' grounds tuh-day, Collier!" chuckled Coyote Flinders, a hunk of steaming meat in one fist and a tin cup of java in the other. "You bein' a train bandit, he's prob'ly follered you, off an' on, ain't he?"

Rockford evaded the question neatly by eying his own gold-plated six-guns, now reposing in Flinders's basket-woven holsters.

"I recognize Rockford's shootin' irons," he said, drinking deeply of the black coffee. "Yuh steal his gold-plated handcuffs in the bargain?"

Coyote Flinders proudly produced the gilded manacles, which Rockford pretended to inspect with great admiration and awe. Then he handed back the handcuffs and leaned forward to fix Coyote Flinders with a steady eye.

"You sent the Utah Kid after me tuh help with rustlin' the Bar Slash herd. Jest whar do I come in on the deal? You gents look perty capable o' handlin' jobs yoreself."

Flinders leaned over to put a hand on Rockford's shoulder.

"I reckon the Kid told yuh I'd pay one thousand bucks jest fer an hour's work from you, didn't he?" asked the Black Bunch chief. "Waal, Collier, you kin earn that dinero plumb easy, with yore skill with shootin' irons. Me an' the boys will have our hands full with the Bar Slash herd, but we imported you tuh handle the shootin' end o' the deal."

Rockford gnawed at his boiled beef and waited, hiding his inner excitement behind the job of eating. He had risked everything on the mad, fantastic idea of posing as the famous gunman Sam Collier, invading the Black Bunch lair, and learning the rustlers' secrets first hand. Now he was about to receive his orders.

"It's like this," explained Flinders, gesturing with the bowie knife he used to carve meat off a bone. "The Bar Slash spread is movin' its beef herd south tuh the railroad, by way o' Bearcat Canyon, savvy?

"They got fourteen rannies ridin' with them critters, and day after ter-morrow, the herd will be inside Bearcat Canyon. That's whar the Black Bunch aims tuh take over that hull danged herd, Collier. It'll be the biggest haul a long-ridin' outfit ever pulled west o' the Chisholm Trail, if yuh ask me."

Rockford nodded, visibly impressed. Stealing an entire trail herd from a big ranch like the Bar Slash was daring in the extreme, but the Black Bunch always operated on a huge scale for they had market contacts down in old Mexico.

"Yo're aimin' tuh rustle the Bar Slash herd," grunted Rockford, deciding to act unimpressed by anything Flinders might say. "I'm still waitin' tuh hyar why Sam Collier's necessary tuh yore scheme. Yuh ain't payin' out a thousand simoleons fer nothin'."

Flinders wolfed down a huge chunk of dripping, half-cooked meat and wiped his greasy lips with a red-fuzzed hand.

"Yo're the champeen sharpshooter o' Arizona," said the outlaw boss, "so we're aimin' tuh plant you on the west rim rock o' Bearcat Canyon. Yo're tuh wait until the entire Bar Slash crew is inside the canyon walls, hazin' them beeves south."

Rockford continued eying the rustler king.

"Then, with yore .30-30, yuh'll start pickin' off them fourten riders, from ambush—one by one. Emptyin' fourteen saddles in quick succession calls fer a gun wizard behind the trigger, Collier, because every cartridge has got tuh count. An' the Utah Kid says you kin do the job fer us."

Rockford shrugged, and pointed to the bullet-punched tin can on which he had demonstrated his shooting ability.

"Layin' in ambush on a rim rock an' dry-gulchin' fourteen unsuspectin' cowboys is a cinch," he grunted indifferently. "After the Bar Slash riders are wiped out, you'll seize the herd—is that right?"

Flinders nodded, exposing broken, fanglike teeth in a leer.

"Plumb correct, Collier. Me an' the boys will be hidin' in the ravines borderin' Bearcat Canyon. Soon as we git yore signal that the last cow-prod is salivated, out we ride tuh take over the herd."

Rockford glanced around at the silent, listening outlaws.

"Why didn't yuh save a thousand bucks an' do the job yoreself?" he asked. "You boys are all experts with yore artillery."

Flinders smirked behind his flaming red whiskers.

"Attackin' the point riders close up would be risky, an' likewise it would prob'ly stampede the herd so's they'd break up in little bunches in all o' them side canyons. We got tuh work fast an' keep the herd movin' out o' Yavapai County, an' we figgered yore shootin' from high on the rim rock wouldn't disturb the critters too much fer us tuh handle 'em easy."

The fake Sam Collier shrugged and helped himself to more beef.

"You do yore job as well as I do mine, gents," he grunted, "an' thar won't be nothin' tuh worry about."

The newcomer's complete confidence—or so they interpreted his words—seemed to pep up the Black Bunch. Whisky bottles were pro-

duced, and they topped off their crude meal with fiery rotgut.

"An' now, I'm goin' tuh try forkin' Tommy Rockford's hoss," announced Coyote Flinders, as he went out to the brush corral and returned leading the roan thoroughbred. "This hot-blood pony will be the top bronc on my string, I reckon."

Rockford's nostrils tightened as he saw Flinders saddling up Kentucky. The rest of the Black Bunch squatted about in the firelight, busy rolling quirlies or stoking their pipes.

"Makes me boil tuh see that skunk riggin' up my Kentuck!" raged the cowboy dick to himself. "But I cain't help myself."

Coyote Flinders set foot to Kentucky's stirrup and mounted.

"Gentle as a kitten!" chuckled the outlaw, looking around. "Now watch me rake this roan an' show yuh some fancy buckin'."

At the words, Coyote Flinders jabbed his needle-sharp spur into Kentucky's flanks with cruel force. Rockford winced and hot wrath fused his cheeks with crimson, but his reaction went unnoticed as the Black Bunch leaned forward to see what the horse would do. Nor did they have long to wait!

With an angry squeal, Kentucky suddenly arched his back like the mainspring of a broken clock, swapped end for end, and then jarred Flinders to the marrow as he bogged his head down and went sunfishing out of the firelight.

Bam! Back into the flickering light came the hurtling body of the Black Bunch chief, to land in a heavy sprawl of arms and legs a few feet away. Back in the shadows, Kentucky pawed the ground and his nostrils heaved with triumphant snorts.

Coyote Flinders picked himself up, looking dazed.

"Why, the danged crowbait!" bawled the king of rustlers, when he got his breath. "I'll whip him raw fer throwin' me!"

Jaw thrust forward grimly, Flinders strode to the tent and returned with a long-lashed whip. He strode out to where Kentucky stood his ground with upflung head, and the gang noticed that their boss was planning to use the shot-weighted handle of the whip for a club.

"No yuh don't!" The words rang out like a fire bell to spin Coyote Flinders in his tracks.

He found himself confronted by the hombre he knew as Sam Collier, the gunman from down south. In the stranger's hand was a cocked six-gun.

"Nobody whips a hoss while I'm around, Flinders!" snarled Tommy Rockford. "That goes fer you, in front o' yore own gang. Yuh ain't beatin' a good hoss jest because he was too hot tuh set. Back down, or I'll make yuh dance!"

The Black Bunch was paralyzed with surprise. Men began dodging to get out of the line of fire. For any man—even the great Sam Collier himself—to dare sass the king of rustlers was the same as committing suicide.

But Coyote Flinders did not draw the golden .45s at his hips. Instead, he relaxed and tossed the whip to one side.

"Yo're right, Collier," he growled. "I jest lost my temper. You an' me got too important work tuh do, tuh be augerin' or gun fightin'."

Rockford slowly holstered his gun as the crisis passed and the astonished Black Bunch settled back.

Something soft nuzzled Rockford's shoulder, and the cowboy dick turned to see the Kentucky thor-

oughbred nibbling affectionately at his neck.

"This hoss acts like he knows you, Collier!" grated Flinders, his tone once more hostile and suspicious. "How come?"

Rockford shrugged, but his heart was racing with alarm. Coyote Flinders had been sharp enough to see that Kentucky recognized him. If he put two and two together, Rockford knew he would never leave the outlaw camp alive.

"Thoroughbreds is intelligent, Flinders," he explained calmly. "This hoss seen me save him from a whippin', so he was thankin' me. Thar ain't nothin' wrong in that, is there?"

Flinders said nothing and led Kentucky back to the cavvy in the corral, while Rockford turned back to join the Black Bunch.

Alone in the darkness, Coyote Flinders scratched his red stubble and creased his brow with thought.

"O' course, it's a loco idea," he growled to himself, "but that hoss shore acted like he'd seen Collier an' knew him well. If that hairpin *ain't* Sam Collier, then he'd have tuh be Tommy Rockford's ghost. An' that's impossible. I wonder——"

CHAPTER VII.

SLADE OF THE BAR SLASH.

THE outlaw camp awakened before sunrise the next morning, and Tommy Rockford joined the gang in an icy, invigorating dip in the waters of the Yavapai River. He had had a good night's sleep, using blankets which the gang had lent him.

The Black Bunch had accepted him whole-heartedly as being Sam Collier in person. In fact, the previous night's squabble with their boss had lifted Rockford in their respect, for it stamped him as an hombre utterly unafraid of consequences.

Flinders, a friendly grin on his features, approached the cowboy dick after they had breakfasted.

"The Bar Slash herd will be movin' intuh Bearcat Canyon early termorrow mornin', Collier!" said the boss rustler. "The p'int whar you'll station yoreself tuh do the bushwhackin' act is a good fifteen mile north o' hyar."

Rockford hitched at his shell belts.

"Remember I lost my rifle in the avalanche yestidy," he reminded Flinders. "I got tuh use a borrowed gun, which will make the job a ticklish one. So I think I'll scout Bearcat Canyon tuh-day an' do some target practice—an' find out exactly whar I'll want tuh do the job."

Flinders nodded instant assent. "A good idea," he agreed. "Be shore yo're back at camp tuh-night, though, in time tuh go over last-minute plans. Yuh see, at midnight we're ridin' up the canyon ourselves, so as tuh be all hidden afore the trail starts movin'."

Rockford was not sure of the tone in the outlaw chief's voice as he ordered the dick to be back in camp that night. But without further comment, he accepted a stock saddle which Flinders provided, roped a leggy chestnut out of the Black Bunch *remuda*, and saddled up.

A half hour later, he was heading into the rock-walled corridor of Bearcat Canyon. Under his right saddle skirt was a booted .45-70 carbine, the property of the late Kak Sleimer.

"Whew! I'm glad tuh be out in the open ag'in!" he breathed. "The Black Bunch don't have the slightest idea I ain't Sam Collier. Now I'll be able tuh warn the Bar Slash buckaroos about the trap."

For the better part of the morning, Rockford rode up the twisting course of Bearcat Canyon. At frequent intervals he reined into a side draw to make positive that Flinders had not put a spy on his trail, to watch his actions during the day.

But the bandit gang had evidently accepted him at face value, for no one was trailing him.

Leaving Bearcat Canyon, the cowboy dick headed out into the broad expanse of Sagebrush Basin, which he had learned was the vast range on which the Bar Slash Ranch had its range.

"An' thar's the trail herd, by gosh!" exclaimed Rockford, as he saw a smudge of dust on the northern horizon. "Movin' slow an' steady so as tuh keep 'em fat, an' headin' fer Bearcat Canyon. The Black Bunch had a right good scheme figgered out."

Rockford galloped across the prairie, his eyes scanning the terrain for a view of the Bar Slash chuck wagon, which should be traveling in advance of the herd. And soon, a mile distant, on the bank of a willow-fringed creek, Rockford saw a *remuda* of cow ponies, a chuck wagon, and a bed wagon.

Several night-shift riders and a Chinese range cook were at the camp as Rockford galloped up.

"Is the *segundo* around?" he asked.

A rawboned oldster with a white ram's-horn mustache stepped out from under the shade of the bed wagon.

"I'm Ezra Slade, owner o' the Bar Slash brand!" he said. "If yo're honin' tuh lease yore rope, son, I'm sorry. We got a full crew. But yo're more'n welcome tuh light an' cool yore saddle an' have chuck with us, if yo're belly's empty."

The railroad detective dismounted and swatted trail dust from Collier's brown Angora chaps. He took Slade's arm and led the steely-eyed old rancher off to one side.

"I got somethin' tuh tell you that'll pin yore ears back, Slade!" he began. "It'll sound impossible, but it's true."

While Ezra Slade listened incredulously, Tommy Rockford told his entire story, from the time he had seen Sam Collier die in the avalanche disaster, to the previous night's conference when complete plans had been made by the Black Bunch for the wholesale slaughter of the Bar Slash riders and the stealing of the herd.

"It sounds impossible," whispered Ezra Slade, clawing at his mustache. "But why can't we take some o' my boys hyar an' go down tuh the mouth o' Gunsight Pass whar you say the Black Bunch is camped, an' corral 'em? Then we kin turn 'em over tuh the sheriff at Silverville an' collect——"

Rockford shook his head to this suggestion.

"They're hidden in the brush an' would see yuh comin' afore yuh could surround 'em," he declared earnestly. "No, the only way tuh ketch Flinders's gang is tuh use their own trap on 'em, Slade. Make 'em think I *have* killed all o' yore riders ter-morrow an' draw the Black Bunch out intuh the open—an' then cut down on 'em in the canyon whar they ain't got room tuh run!"

Slade eyed Rockford sharply.

"What yuh mean, make 'em think my waddies are dead?"

Rockford outlined the plan he had figured out during his ride up through Bearcat Canyon:

"Listen. I'll begin shootin' at yore riders, accordin' tuh plan—only I'll aim high. One by one, yore cowboys will flop out o' their sad-

dles, playin' dead. When I give the signal from the rim rock, Coyote Flinders an' his hull gang will come out o' hidin', not knowin' anything's wrong. Then yore riders kin quit playin' possum an' cover the Black Bunch. They can't show fight because their escape will be cut off by me, on the rim rock."

Slade argued for several minutes, but finally gave in.

"O. K., Rockford," he said. "I'll have my hands play possum when you start shootin' ter-morrow, an' then we'll bag the Black Bunch, red-handed."

Rockford was in high spirits as he left the Bar Slash trail camp and headed back through the mellow afternoon sunlight in the direction of the Black Bunch camp on the Yavapai River.

He was positive his scheme would work, with Ezra Slade's help. Coyote Flinders's rustling gang would fall victims to their own trap, and the Bar Slash herd would be saved without the death of a single rider.

By the time he had reached the halfway point on the return ride through Bearcat Canyon, blue shadows were thickening as the sun westered toward the jagged Nevada horizon. It was pitch dark by the time Tommy Rockford cantered out into the river bottom land and hailed the outlaw camp.

Arriving at the camp fire where the Black Bunch were once more having supper, Tommy dismounted, stripped the saddle from his sweat-dripping cayuse, and grinned as Coyote Flinders bow-legged up to meet him.

"Everything's set fer to-morrow's trap!" announced the fake Sam Collier, as he walked back to the camp with Flinders. "I got the place picked out where I'll do my rifle shootin', an'——"

Rockford broke off as he saw the grim faces about him. Flinders took the cowboy dick's sleeve in his heavy grasp.

"Yuh know, Collier, I was suspicious o' you last night when Tommy Rockford's hoss seemed tuh know yuh!" he said hoarsely. "So when yuh was swimmin' afore breakfast I even looked at the initials in the waistband o' yore chaps."

A vague uneasiness stirred the hair on the nape of Rockford's neck. His reception to-night was chilly and sinister.

"Ramroddin' a gang o' long-riders is serious work," he returned good-naturedly. "Yuh got tuh be shore o' things."

Coyote Flinders grip tightened on Rockford's arm.

"An' that's jest why I rode down tuh Bitter Crick this afternoon while you was gone!" he snarled. "I brought back with me the hombre that kin identify yuh as Sam Collier —yore friend an' mine, the Utah Kid!"

CHAPTER VIII.

DOOMED TO DIE.

TOMMY ROCKFORD did not wait for the Utah Kid to get to his feet, over behind the camp fire. He knew his time had come, and that show-down had caught him in the middle of a hostile camp without hope of escape.

With a sharp cry of desperation, Rockford jerked his arm free of Flinders's grasp, and his hand blurred toward the single six-gun he carried at the right thigh of his shaggy Angora chaps.

"Grab the skunk!" Flinders bellowed the words even as he swung a terrific haymaker at Rockford's dodging head, the knuckles grazing the waddy's temple.

But the Black Bunch had been waiting for Rockford's return and were ready. Before the cowboy dick's fingers had coiled about the notched butt of Collier's gun, he felt iron-muscled hands seize both his elbows and jerk him roughly backward.

Thud! Bam! Gun barrels lashed at his skull.

Fingers clawed at the six-gun he was trying frantically to jerk out of leather. Then he went down in a wallow of battling figures, two outlaws hanging on either arm.

His spurred boots lashed out. One heel cracked hard on a whiskery jaw. He wrenched his left arm free, pulped a leering Mexican face outlined against the crackling camp fire.

Coyote Flinders jumped on top of Rockford's body, kicking the breath from his lungs with stamping boots. A leather-shod toe battered skin from his jaw. His brain was reeling, the strength fleeing from his sinews.

Crash! A six-gun barrel found his temple, cut through flesh, and started crimson trickling warmly across his face.

When he opened his eyes again he was being dragged erect, the entire Black Bunch hanging to his legs and arms, the panting figure of Coyote Flinders in front of him. The six-gun had been yanked out of his fingers, and he was doomed.

"He's a wild cat, all right!" wheezed one rustler. "Come on over hyar, Kid!"

A lanky figure which had not joined the brief rough-and-tumble combat stepped out into the firelight and stood beside Coyote Flinders. The Utah Kid's pale eyes surveyed Rockford's tousled hair and battered face, his tattered shirt, and clenched, crimson-smeared fists.

"I don't know this jigger, boss," said the Utah Kid quietly, "but it's prob'ly Tommy Rockford himself. That body we went up tuh look at in Gunsight Pass this evenin' was Sam Collier, wearin' this jigger's clothes."

Coyote Flinders rubbed his sweat-rinsed face with a sleeve.

"Then Rockford ran a sandy on us fer shore yesterday," he growled. "Dived intuh that gully whar Sam Collier croaked an' did a quick clothes change. No wonder I figured it was the ghost o' Tommy Rockford that that Kentucky hoss knowed last night."

Despair made an ice block out of the trapped lawman's heart. He had played out his string and lost. The Utah Kid, inspecting the true Sam Collier's corpse, had exposed his hoax. But it was not for his own life that Tommy Rockford was now despairing; he had gambled that and would take loss like a he-man.

The knowledge that the Bar Slash cow-punchers would ride blindly into a death trap on the morrow left Rockford weak and panting in the grasp of the Black Bunch killers. Ezra Slade, thinking that Rockford would be firing high from the rim rock to-morrow noon, would send his waddies to their deaths.

"I'll hand it to yuh, Rockford!" snarled Coyote Flinders. "Fer sheer grit an' bravery, I never knowed a hombre like you. It's too bad yo're on the other side o' the fence; the Black Bunch could use a wild cat like you."

Flinders was taking out the gold-plated .45 Peacemakers as he spoke. Rockford felt his captors moving sidewise, so as to get out from behind his body.

"An' now yo're eatin' lead, Rockford!" rasped Flinders. "Anything

tuh say afore yuh take yore medicine?"

Rockford braced himself against the shock of tearing lead as he saw Flinders aim the twin Colts at his chest. Death was only seconds away, now.

"Jest this," he panted, in a last desperate effort to save the Bar Slash punchers. "I tipped off the trail-herd crew about yore trap. You skunks better vamose tuh-night, because yore plans won't work out in Bearcat Canyon."

Flinders laughed harshly and cocked the guns. Rockford saw the big round bores of his golden guns looming at him like the black mouths of twin cannons, as Flinders's talonlike trigger fingers started to tighten.

"Adios, Rockford!" he jeered. "Yuh had this comin', an' here——"

Brrrang! The shots deafened Tommy, but no flash came from the six-guns in Flinders's hands.

Instead, the Utah Kid standing beside the boss outlaw suddenly sagged, clutching at crimson-spouting bullet holes in his neck.

Brrram! Brrang! Bang-bang-bang! The black night seemed to explode in a million bits, as members of the Black Bunch began dropping to the ground on both sides of the cowboy lawman.

Even as he felt the grasps loosening on his arms, Tommy Rockford saw the black wall of the night perforated with dozens of red gun flashes, and the night roared with thundering hoofbeats and the hoarse yells of shooting men.

Coyote Flinders took one look at the dead figure of the Utah Kid, and then leaped toward the corral. Tommy Rockford, batting his eyes stupidly, did not understand the meaning of his miraculous rescue until he saw the lanky figure of Ezra Slade clinging to the side of one of the horses which were galloping around and around the Black Bunch camp.

"The Bar Slash riders! They're attackin' the camp!" The amazing truth dawned in Rockford's mind. "The crooks was so intent on watchin' me git killed that they didn't hear the Bar Slash cowboys ridin' up through the brush!"

Bullets whistled on all sides. Bar Slash punchers, spurring their horses in circular fashion like Indians attacking a prairie-schooner caravan, were mowing down the Black Bunch killers like flies.

Then Rockford, staggering forward through the smoke and dust, caught a glimpse of his Kentucky horse leaping out of the brush corral. Clinging astride his bare back was Coyote Flinders, horror on his red-whiskered countenance.

Bunching his fore hoofs, Kentucky halted, and Flinders did a nose dive over the thoroughbred's ears. Flinders landed on his feet, and whirled with the gold-plated six-guns blazing as he saw Tommy Rockford's crouched figure.

Dropping to his knees, the cowboy dick snatched a Colt from a dead rustler underfoot. With slugs plucking at the goat-hair chaps on his legs, Tommy triggered five fast, accurate shots into the king of rustlers.

Skull drilled in two places by leaden slugs, Coyote Flinders flopped headlong a few feet away. Tommy Rockford lurched forward and was busy prying his gold-plated Colts from the dead outlaw chief's grasp when the Bar Slash boys found him in the middle of the destroyed camp.

"Looks like we got hyar in the

nick o' time, Rockford!" laughed big Ezra Slade, as the Bar Slash waddies crowded about the lawman. "We took a short cut hyar tuh the Yavapai River while you was ridin' through Bearcat Canyon, jest tuh see if yore story was right or if you was a bandick with some trick up yore sleeve. They was wrasslin' with yuh when we spotted the camp fire an' rode up through the brush."

Tommy Rockford grinned weakly, and shook hands with the boss of the ranch whose trail herd he had saved.

"The only thing I'm complainin' about," he said, "is that yuh didn't leave me a single Black Bunch crook tuh dab my gold-plated handcuffs on, tuh-night. It looks as though yuh'd stamped out them hyenas complete an' final!"

PUP

THE END OF A RANCHERS' FEUD

A FARMER of Missouri, Jerry Burnett, had been a victim on several occasions, of the notorious Jayhawkers. When his home was wrecked beyond repair in 1858, Jerry thought that it was time to move. He set out on a long journey to Texas in a covered wagon, with his family. He decided to settle at Denton Creek, and there he went into the cattle business on the open range.

Rancher Burnett started with a small herd, but in a few years he was one of the most successful cattlemen of Texas. His son, Burk, was a top hand while he was still in his teens. Burk was not only a born cowman, he was also a born diplomat. He became the friend of Quanah Parker, the Comanche chief who started the battle of Adobe Walls, with the intention of wiping out the buffalo hunters.

Through Quanah's helpful friendship, Burk secured big leases of land in Indian Territory. His dealing with the Indians were always fair and square, and they had complete confidence in him.

Like most men who are more prosperous than their neighbors, Burk Burnett had difficulties with other stockmen, some of whom were jealous of his success, and spoke sneeringly of his friendship with Injuns.

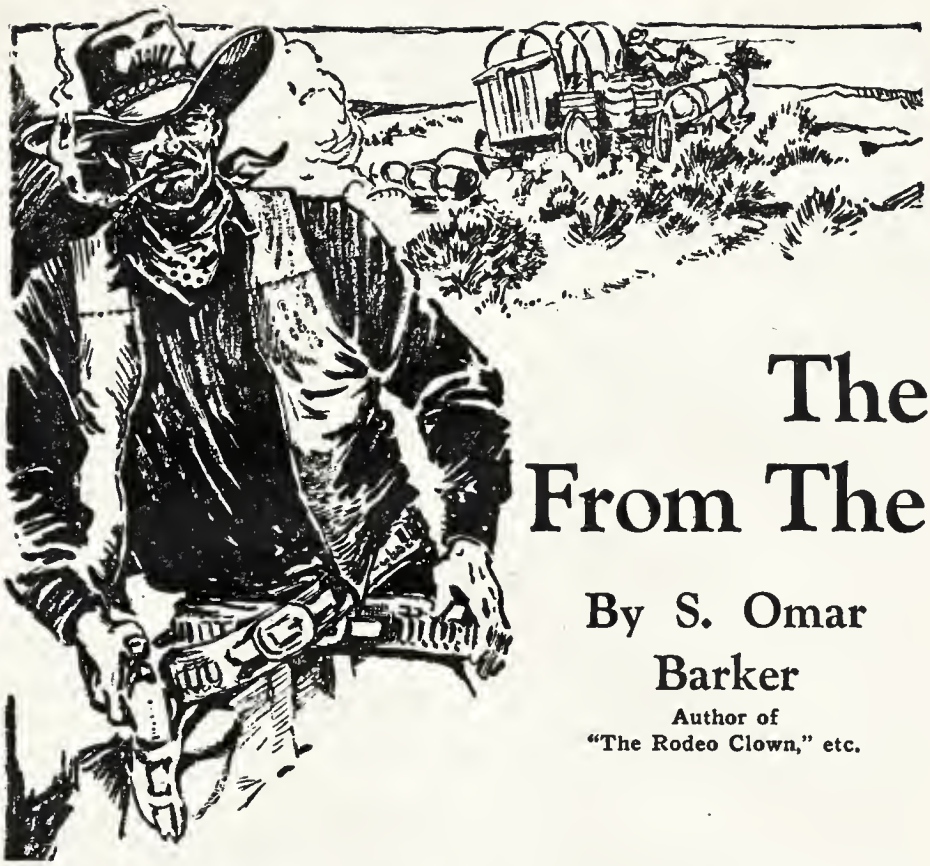
There was one ranchman in particular, Farley Sears, who was always at odds with Burnett, and every one on the range realized that, sooner or later, a clash between the two would have to come in the usual way and with the usual result.

One day, the two met in the town of Paducah. They had both put up at the Paducah Hotel, but neither knew that the other one was there.

Burnett entered the wash room and was surprised to see his enemy, Farley Sears, who was busily engaged in washing his face. He looked up as Burnett entered, and, recognizing the man he hated, he made a move for his gun, but his wet hands prevented a fast draw.

Burk Burnett saw the move, and, in the batting of an eyelid, his own Colt was in his right hand. Farley Sears was dead before he could complete his draw.

When Burk was on trial for killing Sears, the jury brought in a verdict of self-defense and justifiable homicide. And the incident was ended.

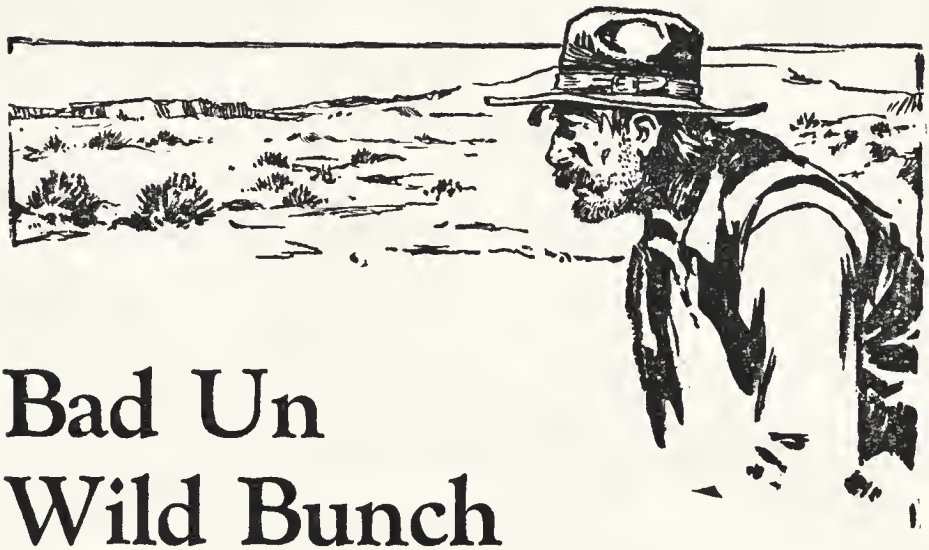


The
From The

By S. Omar Barker

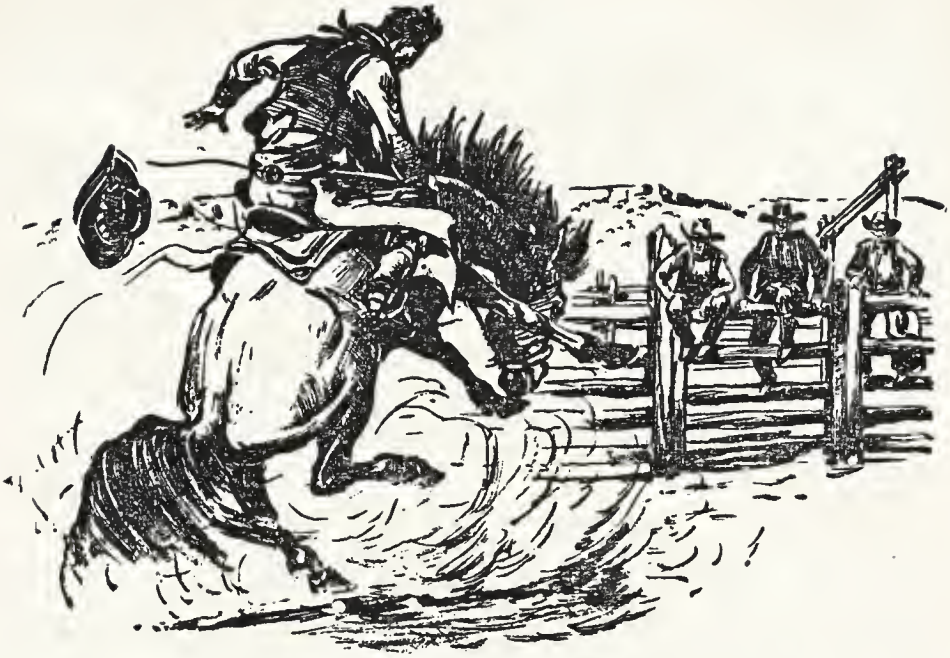
Author of "The Rodeo Clown," etc.

He said he come from nowheres an' was headed the same place,
An' he wore two guns with notches, an' a bold look on his face.
The trail boss looked him over an' he said: "I'm short of hands.
Do your work up in the saddle, an' it's all this job demands."
Then he asked him what his name was, but this feller shook his head:
"I'm a he-wolf out of hell, but you can call me Jones," he said.
"If you want to know my hist'ry, well, the devil was my paw,
An' my temper's kind o' sudden, an' I'm lightnin' on the draw!"
Then ol' Gus, the cook, come limpin', an' he kind o' circled round,
An' his squint eyes looked him over from his big hat to the ground;
Then he shrugged his stoopy shoulders, but he never said a word,
As the trail boss an' the stranger loped away to join the herd.
Well, the boss said Jones was windy, but he guessed he'd have tuh do,
For the work was purty heavy an' the hands was kinda few.
So the boys jest "held their 'taters," an' they never razzed him none
When he blowed off round the camp fire 'bout the salty things he'd done.
For he claimed to be a bad un from the wild bunch, full o' fleas,
Who could face a draw an' beat it with an ol' gun fighter's ease.
Told about how Wild Bill Hickok ducked his tail an' wouldn't fight,
When he'd yanked the blond bull's whiskers in a Dodge saloon one night.
Said he'd shot the cook for grumblin' on a spread where he had rode—
They'd bug their eyes, you betcha, if his real name they knowed!
But the boys jest set a-smokin', conterdictin' naught he said,
An' ol' Gus, the cook, he grunted an' went limpin' off to bed.



Bad Un Wild Bunch

In the mornin', when they'd saddled, ever' man throwed in his roll,
But the new hand left his layin' where he'd slept upon a knoll.
You can pull a heap of meanness an' nobody says a word
When the crew's plumb short of punchers an' you're helpin' shove a herd,
But amongst the things forbidden by the old cow-workin' code,
Is to leave your roll of beddin' for the cook to have to load.
But ol' Gus hitched up his hosses, not a word he had to say,
As the new hand forked his saddle an' rode rollickin' away.
Then cook took a piece of lass' rope an' the new hand's bed he tied
To the axle of the wagon, kind o' grim an' foxy-eyed.
All day long behind the wagon Jones's bed roll drug the dust.
When they come to camp that evenin' all the boys thought hell would bust,
For this Jones, he stood an' eyed it, tore an' tattered like a rag,
An' they saw him hitch his guns up, kind o' liftin' out the sag.
Then he roared like some ol' lion, an' he let in for to cuss,
An' he wolfed around the wagon, an' he bellied up to Gus,
An' he said: "You dirty coyote, I've *killed* cooks fer less than that!"
Then he give ol' Gus a shove, an' kind o' slapped him with his hat.
Funny thing, but nary cowboy made a move to save the cook,
Though with age his hair was grizzled. All they done was stand an' look,
As ol' Gus limped back a step or two, an' Jones reached for his gun.
But ol' Gus jest kind o' squinted, an' he made no move to run.
"Mister Jones," he said, an' drawled it, "now's the time to come to taw.
If you want to swap some shootin', all you got to do is draw,
For you see my six-gun's stuck here in the belt that holds my pants.
If you're trigger finger's itchy—well, I'm givin' you yer chance!"
Like the twilight fades the sunset, so the new hand's gills growed pale,
As his hands swung outwards stiffly like the wings upon a quail.
"Goshamighty, man!" he hollered. "Cain't you take a little joke?"
Then the cook reached grimly over an' picked up the wagon yoke.
Jest once was all Gus whacked him in the region of his seat,
Then he turned back to his cookin'—for a trail crew's got to eat.
Yes, sir, that was all that happened, though the boys all swapped a look,
An' they heard no more from Jones about the time he shot the cook!
Two guns he wore, with notches for the men downed by his lead.
But the curly wolf next mornin'—well, he loaded his own bed!



A Fightin' Wild Cat Fer Lazy M

By Charles M. Martin

Author of "Ol' Judge Blue," etc.

RIDING up to the Lazy M bunk house, Jase Catron asked "Gimp" Bowen where the boss could be found. The crippled old cook eyed Catron up and down and showed two teeth in each side of his mouth when he grinned.

"Won't I do till Boss Macey rides in fer grub?" he asked lazily, and cocked his head birdlike for the answer.

"I'm a cowboy, not a button wrangler," Catron clipped sharply. "So my business is still with the ramrod of this Lazy M outfit!"

Old Gimp had been a cowboy in his day, and a top hand. "You ain't much more'n a button," he said carelessly. "I could use a yearlin' to help with the chores and to take a turn with the workin' remuda."

Jase Catron climbed down from his battered old saddle and wabbled forward on his high heels. His brush jacket and chaps were torn and ragged from cat's-claw and mesquite, but all his movements were those of a saddle hand who knew his way around.

A shock of red hair hung out of

a rent in his battered old Stetson when he stalked up to the old cook and stuck his head out like a rooster on the prod.

"Listen, cooky," he said thinly, "I'm top hand on any spread where I roll my soogans, and you durn well know it from the look in yore squinchy old eyes. I'm just tellin' you to save that hoorawin' until after I sign with Boss Macey. You savvy my talkin'?"

"Get yore hackles down," old Gimp answered slowly. "You ain't signed on yet, and you better coil yore rope and ride on out. You'd hate the day you joined up with this outfit if you did make a hand, which same I doubts from the look of yore riggin' and gear!"

Jase Catron puckered his eyes and sucked in a deep breath. "My gear will hang together till I earn some new," he muttered, like a man will do who likes good tools and rates the best. Then he looked closely at Gimp Bowen and shook his head. "How come this place is so rough, tough, and nasty?" he inquired softly.

"You'll cut 'er, cowboy," the old cook answered warmly, shaking off his air of indifference. "Boss Macey will work you all day and half the night," he explained earnestly. "And he'll whip the tar out of you the first time you cross him up!"

The redhead skinned back his lips and hooked both hands in his gun belt. Nothing wrong with his hardware and sling, well oiled and shiny from care and use.

"I don't whip that easy," he grunted. "I'm twenty-two come beef round-up, cooky. And I ain't been whipped in seven years."

"Just you stay around close," the old cook murmured, and glanced down the lane. "Yonder comes Boss Macey with the boys."

Jase Catron tightened his lean jaw and swung slowly around as a troop of racing cowboys spurred into the big ranch yard and headed for the corrals. A tall, slender man in his early forties was first to strip his riding gear, and even while he worked with deceptively swift hands, his cold blue eyes watched the other riders with an intensity that missed no detail. Then he came straight to the rail near the bunk house and looked Jase Catron over slowly.

"I'm Macey," he introduced himself quietly. "You lookin' for a place to roll 'em?"

The cowboy nodded his red head. "I'm needin' a job, and I'll make a hand," he answered slowly. "Top hand," he added, and stuck out his jaw as if expecting an argument. "What you payin'?"

Boss Macey raised his eyes quickly and spoke in the same even tones. "You ought to know," he answered shortly. "Most of the crew draws forty and found; top hands rate fifty—if they can earn it!"

"I can earn it," the cowboy answered confidently, and his voice was a bit edgy. "Startin' to-morrow?"

"Starting to-day," Macey corrected grimly. "After supper you can try yore luck on a long-coupled fuzzy in the breaking pen. Then you and me will ride out and rope a range bull the boys gave up this afternoon!"

"That's tops with me," the cowboy grunted. "Where do I unroll 'em?"

Boss Macey smiled with his blue eyes for the first time during the interview. "Show you myself," he answered with a nod that said he considered the matter settled, and led the way inside the long bunk house.

Jase Catron pulled his saddle

strings and carried his meager bed roll inside. Macey pointed to the first cot and waited until the cowboy had spread his blankets. Then he stared down at the gun belt and spoke softly.

"Check yore hardware with Gimp," he clipped. "We don't have rustlers here any more to speak of, and a man keeps out of trouble when he don't have the difference so close to his hand."

Jase Catron straightened slowly and looked the tall man squarely in the eyes. "I don't need the difference," he said softly, and unbuckled the belt.

"Well, you might," Macey grunted, and turned on his heel. "Wash basin's out back, and you can check yore cutter with the cooky. He can likewise tell you anything you might want to know."

Jase Catron watched the wide shoulders barely clear the door when Macey left the bunk house. The Lazy M owner was six feet tall and flat of hip from a lifetime in the saddle. He gave a man the impression that he knew what he was doing, and the cowboy shook his head and muttered grudgingly to himself.

"Top hand if I ever saw one. He don't look like the way Billy told it."

Then he shrugged and walked through the long building to the back door. Handed his gun belt to old Gimp Bowen, but the cook rattled his skillets and jerked his head toward a wooden box.

"Dump it with the rest," he directed carelessly. "You can get it again when you get through."

Jase Catron jerked up and scraped his feet. "What kind of an outfit is this?" he asked sharply.

Gimp Bowen shrugged without looking up. "Go cool yore head off in the trough," he advised. "You won't make tops here fighting yore head all the time." He glanced up briefly. "You might think that over, cowboy," he added softly.

Jase Catron swung out and dipped a basin of water. He ducked his head for a cowboy wash and dried on a roller towel hanging near a cracked mirror. He turned slowly when Boss Macey called his name and introduced him to the seven cowboys waiting outside the cook shack.

"This feller is drawing top-hand pay, boys," Macey finished in a matter-of-fact tone. "And it's my guess he'll earn it. Jase is going to top off that Midnight hoss to settle his supper."

Jase Catron noticed the looks that passed between the riding crew. He had been raised on cattle ranches, and he knew every trick of the trade: Bunk-house hazing and hoorawing, burrs under the saddle, and tall windies when the gang was round-siding after a day's work. But he also detected a certain marked degree of respect when they eyed him steadily and nodded.

He was last man in the cook shack so as not to take some old-timer's place at the table. He stared for a minute when he found one end of the table vacant with a single chair in place. Every other seat was taken, with boss Macey at the far end in the place of honor. Jase Catron straddled his chair and fell to eating without comment, but he knew he was among men who knew their work and were withholding judgment until he had proved himself.

He was first man up from the table, wiping his brown fingers down the seams of his scarred bullhide chaps. The other men had shucked their chaps, and Boss Macey shoved back his chair and jerked his head when he started for a high pole cor-

ral near the horse corral. He pointed at a four-year-old cayuse while he gave advice in short, crisp sentences.

"He'll fight you all over the tank, Catron. He ain't never been rode, but he ain't a killer. Buckles a knee for a cantle spank to wind up his bag of tricks, and she's yore job to guess which knee. Rope him and he don't have to be eared down."

"Just like that!" the cowboy grunted, and crawled between the bars with his catch rope.

The other cowboys took seats on the top rail and laid bets among themselves. Jase Catron paid them no mind while he built a small loop and flipped it without whirling. He started to hip-lean when he made his catch, and his blue eyes widened when the big black stopped before the slack ran out. Catron brought him over and snubbed him close, and Gimp Bowen grinned when he came to the rails for his battered old saddle.

"She's easy to light in, that pen," he chuckled. "And you look like a hand what knows how to roll."

"Five dollars I don't roll," the cowboy offered sharply, and poised with his saddle.

The old cook went for his tobacco sack and opened the strings. "Make it ten?" he grunted.

"Five is my stake," the cowboy answered quietly, and dug the bill from the pocket of his chaps.

"Five gets ten with me," Bowen almost whispered. "I wouldn't feel right no other way. Up to now that knothead has made me upwards of two hundred."

Boss Macey slid down from the pole and took both bills. "Now bolt that hull on and do yore stuff," he told Catron quietly. "If you win, yo're that much toward a new saddle. You didn't ride in here with any top-hand gear," he pointed out.

Jase Catron stared briefly and shouldered his old kak. He high-heeled to the snubbing post and looked under the saddle skirts. Pulled a cockle burr from the wool and threw the old hull in place without comment, while knowing glances ran around the crowd. Then he took a plaited cotton tie-rope from his belt and flashed a knot in the hackamore. Settling his battered old Stetson on his red head, he reached for the catch rope.

He threw off the loop and hit the high saddle at the same time, with boots snugging deep in the oxbows. The black waited until the rope had touched the ground. Then it moved slowly away from the center post like a plow horse. Suddenly it squealed like a stuck hog and bogged its head like a bullet, heels kicking high.

Jase Catron watched the laid-back ears and lifted his right leg high to scratch from shoulder to rump. His knee-lock was tight again when the bucker landed and went into a turn, and the cowboys cheered for the rider who had taken the first trick.

"Ride him, cowboy!" they yipped.

II.

The black straightened out and threw itself in the air with three feet kicking. Sunfishing and fence-cornering with snappy jerks that had never failed to loosen up a buckaroo. But Jase Catron rode out each buck without losing his hat, and the rail-birds became silent while they waited for the big thing.

Every one of them had fallen victim to the deadly cantle-spank that robbed them of top-hand rating and top-hand pay. The tall, red-headed buckaroo was sitting straight up in the saddle, watching the bucker's laid-back ears.

The black reared suddenly, poised for a breath while it gathered its muscles. Then it swallowed its head and kicked high with both heels.

Jase Catron set his lips grimly and pressed down on the heel of his left boot when he saw the right ear twitch suddenly. Midnight buckled his right knee, and the cowboy was still in the saddle when the snorting horse followed through to sky-hoot with his heels.

The big horse kept its head low for clearance. Then it jerked up with a scream and crashed down to buckle the same knee again. It rocketed up like a flash to bend the left knee, and when it paused for breath, the buckaroo raked it with blunted spurs and swept off his hat.

Gimp Bowen stared through the dust and shook his head when the lean cowboy began to fan the laid-back ears, and Midnight began to buck-jump across the big pen, squalling like a calf—the kind of bucking that any button could ride out and never get up a sweat. The railbirds were silent when the big horse hung its head and straddled its knobby knees.

Jase Catron slid down and jerked his latigo with a grunt. He pulled his hack rope and carried his gear to the rails. Stopping in front of Boss Macey, he held out his hand.

"I got fifteen toward that new saddle, boss," he grunted softly, and took the two bills.

"Salty, ain't yuh?" Macey said quietly. "We'll hit out for the brakes come moonlight. Loan you a saddle for this job!"

"Nuh uh!" the cowboy grunted. "I made this old kak by hand, and I like to know what I'm tying to back there in the brush. Which hoss?"

"You got an hour of daylight left," Macey answered steadily. "Time enough for you to cut out yore string before we leave. Won't have time in the morning because we start work at daybreak. Yonder's the cavy."

The riding crew held their places and watched while Jase Catron looked over the working remuda and made his choices. Not once did he pick another man's horse, and they knew he was checking the saddle marks. Picking them for each kind of work while Boss Macey watched without commenting.

The cowboy chose a line-back dun with a low head for a roping horse, and a short-legged, barrel-chested bay for cutting. Two long-legged broncs for distance and circle work, and then he stopped to study the milling animals with his catch rope in his left hand.

His blue eyes lighted briefly when he spotted a hammer-headed roan in the far corner. Deep of chest and not too long or short in the legs. Heavily muscled in the rump for power and quick turns, and Jase Catron whirled his loop and made his cast over the heads of the running horses. The loop circled the hammerhead, and Gimp Bowen slid down to drop the bars when the cowboy stopped his catch.

"He'll do for that bull," Catron grunted. "And he'll give him fight if that mossyhorn goes on the prod."

Boss Macey turned away to hide the light of admiration in his cool blue eyes. Jase Catron was ragged and gaunt. The horse he had ridden in was a ten-dollar mustang. His boot heels were run over and rusty, but Macey knew cowhands. All he asked was to see them work.

"Better gear him up," he called gruffly. "Take us all of an hour or more to get out there, and by that time the moon will be up. You got an extra rope?"

"We goin' to rope more'n one bull?"

"Just one," Macey clipped.

"Then one rope is enough," the cowboy grunted. "But you can suit yoreself, boss."

Boss Macey wheeled swiftly with eyes narrowed. Jase Catron had his back turned, and the crew grinned when Macey set his lips and reached for his own rope. And when the two rode down the lane of cottonwoods together they rubbed stirrups without speaking.

Twilight deepened while they were crossing a long valley and heading toward the higher reaches. The moon came up over Sentinel Peak when they reached the lava rock and cat's-claw brakes. Not until they came to a brush-choked draw did Boss Macey open his lips, and then he spoke briefly.

"Six-year-old, this black bull," he began. "Fast as a whip, and runs to beef. Got some Angus in him, and I want to use him with a bunch of young stuff to build up the strain."

"You don't want much," the cowboy grunted. "You aim to drive him down in the valley?"

"You rope him down and don't worry about the drive," Macey grunted. "He weighs close to fifteen hundred, and if yore rope is like the rest of yore gear——"

Jase Catron reached for his lariat and shook out his coils.

"It is," he barked, and then caught himself. "I signed on as top hand, Boss Macey," he continued more quietly. "And I got top-hand gear whether you know it or not. Anybody else every try to snare this critter?"

"Everybody," Macey admitted readily. "I tried three times myself. And fifteen bucks will get you thirty toward that new saddle."

"Run him out," the cowboy grunted coldly, and measured a head-size loop. "Never mind his heels," he added. "Just you haze him into the clear and sit yore saddle!"

Boss Macey stared at the lean young face and opened his mouth to speak. But he thought better of it when he saw the jutting jaw and glittering eyes. Shrugging his broad shoulders, he circled the thicket with a grim smile on his bronzed face.

Jase Catron waited until he was alone, and then he fastened the tie-knot to his saddle horn. Cowboys usually dallied with heavy stock, especially when they were working in pairs to rope head and heels.

The tall redhead cuffed his hat down tight, right-handed his loop, and turned the roan toward the brush when the mesquite began to crack.

The chunky roan was also leaning forward with ears pointed to place the black bull. Catron could hear Boss Macey huffin' back in the tangle; could hear the short, snorty bellows that told him the maverick was on the prod and coming fast. Then he caught a glimpse of the animal in a little opening, and his blue eyes narrowed when he stared at the short sharp horns and glistening ebony hide.

Six years old and never roped. Slick-eared and unbranded, with hell in its rolling little eyes. The bull saw the roan horse at the same time and lowered its head to bellow defiance. It threw dirt high over its back, and then made its charge through the thick brush on a straight line.

Horse and rider worked in unison. The roan faunched gingerly to the side like a fighter balancing on the balls of his feet for a ground grip. Jase Catron tightened his knee lock

and loosened his supple body above the waist. With his right arm back to keep his finicky loop away from the brush, and the coils ready in his left to throw away.

Mesquite and buckthorn cracked like burning sticks when the charging bull ripped through the brush screen and hit the clearing like a surging freshet. The roan sidestepped like a cat to make the left horn miss by inches.

Jase Catron settled to the turn and back-handed his loop to snare the thick-muscled neck while the roan was going away. Then he rolled his spurs and threw his coils over the side before the maddened bull could brake to a stop.

Hand-sewed leather creaked when the horse hit the end of the lariat in a plunging leap, and the black bull was jerked end over end, to hit the shale rock with a shock that stunned it for a moment.

The roan leaned back and caught all the slack when the cowboy emptied his saddle and cat-footed down the rope with fingers reaching for the hogging strings looped in the belt of his chaps. Two wraps and a tie around the hind legs in the space of a heartbeat. Another pair of wraps around the forelegs just above the hocks, and Jase Catron threw off his loop and was taking his coils when Boss Macey rode out of the brush with loop whirling to make a heel catch.

"You bring an iron?" the cowboy asked quietly.

Boss Macey slid down and anchored his horse with a ground hitch. "You busted him," he whispered tensely. "And you got him tied off already."

"I hired on as top hand," Catron grunted. "And I try to do my work like one. Get the iron while I build up a twig fire."

III.

Boss Macey walked back to his horse and took a short branding iron from his saddle. He hunkered down thoughtfully in front of the little blaze while the iron was heating and stared for a moment at Jase Catron, who was building a brown-paper quirly with steady hands.

"We had one feller not long ago tried to make top hand on the Lazy M," Macey began. "Billy Joyce, he called hisself. But he didn't have what it takes."

The cowboy stopped for a moment, and then he thumbed a match to flame. "Knew this Billy," he grunted briefly.

"Figgered you did," the older man said quietly. "He rode in wearing the same hogleg in his gun belt."

Jase Catron levered to his feet with blue eyes narrowed and gleaming. "Billy was my brother," he said harshly. "I heard what you done to him!"

"Whipped him, is what I done," Boss Macey said coldly, and straightened up. "I let it pass when he dogged it in the breaking pen. Looked over it when he high-tailed it the day we come back here to get that black devil yonder. But when I caught him cheating at cards in the bunk house I whipped him!"

Jase Catron ground the smoke under his heel and sucked in a long breath. "Billy never had much of a chance," he said slowly. "Ma left the old man when Billy was two years old and I was a yearlin'. What you might call a weaner. She took us back East to Saint Joe, and I run away when I was twelve."

"And Billy?" Macey asked coldly.

"Stayed back there and went to school till he was eighteen," the cowboy answered harshly. "Then he came back to the Circle 2 where him

and me was born. The same little two-bit outfit the old man left us when he disappeared after ma left him."

Boss Macey stood very still. "You and him make a go of it?" he asked quietly.

Jase Catron flushed and twisted uneasily. "Billy was whip-sawed in a poker game by card sharks," he blurted harshly. "We lost the Circle 2, but it wasn't much of an outfit to begin with."

"Nor to end up with," the older man stated bluntly. "Being a top hand like you claim, seems to me you could have made it go!"

"Nobody asked you," the cowboy growled, and pulled the cherry-red iron from the coals, knelt down on the bull and branded the left shoulder while Boss Macey watched closely and nodded approval.

"Him," he said evenly, and pointed to the bull, "we'll leave him tied to-night, and in the morning I'll bring old Brutus up here with a neck yoke. Brutus is nearly a ton of ox, and he'll bring that Angus down to the corral, where he gets his grain every day."

"We all done here for to-night?" Jase Catron asked quietly.

"All done cow work," Macey answered just as softly.

"They call you 'boss' in these parts," the cowboy said harshly, "because you got the habit of whippin' any man that crosses you up. And you whipped my brother Billy until he had to take to his bed for three days!"

Boss Macey raised his eyes and nodded. "Well?" he whispered.

"I taken up for him," the cowboy rasped, and shucked his jumper. "You ain't never had a top hand on yore Lazy M spread; that's the reason why you rode 'em big and told 'em scarey!"

"Hold yore mad, feller," Macey warned quietly. "We ain't had a top hand so far, but it looks like you qualified to-night. That chair at the head of the table opposite mine has been empty a long time, but I reckon you can fill it. You don't look like the kind of a waddy that would cheat at cards!"

A rocky-hard fist whipped out suddenly and battered against his mouth. Boss Macey rolled with the punch and stepped in with two short-armed blows ripping into the lean belly of his attacker. Jase Catron grunted and gave ground, and then he stood toe to toe and swapped blows without thought of defense.

Boss Macey side-stepped and stuck out his boot when the tall cowboy hurtled past him. Catron went to hands and knees and looped into a roll. He came up grimly and charged again with his teeth clenched tightly and his head whirling. Evenly matched as to height and weight, but he knew he was up against a real fighter.

He came in cautiously, weaving from the waist and feinting with a snaky left. Boss Macey cuffed it down and crossed with a short right that caught the cowboy on the jaw and sat him down hard on his hip pockets. And then the older man stepped back and waited until Jase Catron levered up to his feet, shaking his red head.

"Got enough," Macey asked quietly, "or do you figger to rate tops in skull and knuckle?"

Jase Catron hunched his shoulders and stuck his jaw out while he shuffled in. Boss Macey met him and took a left to the head to land a counter punch. Then he measured his man and drove his right with all his weight and muscle behind the blow. Careless of the fact that Catron was winging the same punch.

The two blows thudded home solidly with a sound like clubs beating on a pile of wet sacks. Both men staggered back away from each other and tried to raise their arms against a fall. Then they toppled forward and locked shoulders until paralyzed leg muscles gave way to sprawl them to the ground.

The hog-tied bull slobbered in the moonlight and tried to make his feet. Minutes ticked away with no movement from the battered fighters. Then Jase Catron stirred and opened his eyes, but closed them as quickly when the pain in his head sent him down to earth again.

His hand touched hard flesh and started to draw away. He stopped the move when rope-muscled fingers closed weakly—fingers that gathered strength and finally vised down with a grip that made the cowboy wince. Then two bodies pushed up and leaned against each other for support.

"You want some more?" Jase Catron growled in a far-away voice.

"Naw." The answer came from a great distance. "And neither do you, yuh salty hairpin. She was a double knock-out and a draw, the way I seen it."

They pushed erect against each other and braced their rusty boots wide for balance. Then Boss Macey licked the trickling blood from his lips and grinned at the battered face so close to his own. Blue eyes lost their glare, and Jase Catron looked away with teeth biting his lower lip.

"You fought 'er fair, ol'-timer," the cowboy grunted. "You didn't give me the boots when you had the chance, the way Billy told it."

Boss Macey drew a deep breath and veiled his eyes to hide the hurt. "I hit Billy one time," he almost whispered. "Pulled my punch to keep him on his feet, but he took a dive and stayed down. The boys will tell you the same thing."

Jase Catron opened his eyes wide and stared. "You only hit him once?"

"You can't hit a feller who won't fight," Macey muttered. "In front of all the boys, Jase. I'd have rather lost the spread than see him show the feather."

Jase Catron shrugged his shoulders back and gripped the older man with both hands. Fingers tightened down when he felt the steely forearms tense. Then Boss Macey raised his head again and stared into the blue eyes that were now smiling in the moonlight.

"I'm staying on the Lazy M to make a hand," he said slowly. "Do I rate top hand with this outfit?"

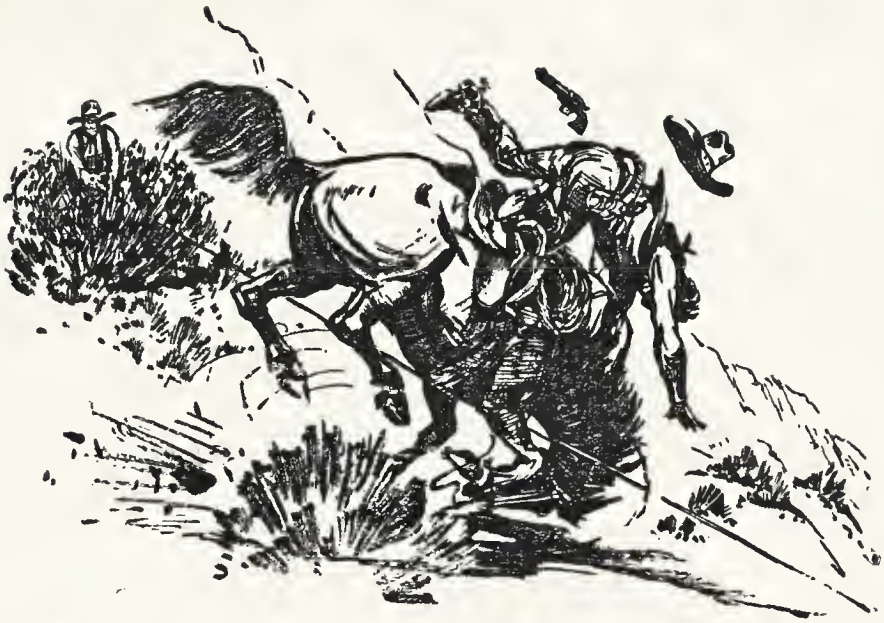
Boss Macey began to tremble. Jerked away and knuckled a tear from his eyes. Then he caught the cowboy in a bear grip and thumped him behind the shoulders.

"I'm thankful for one thing," he said at last, and his voice was muted. "Glad Billy didn't give his right name when he geared his tops and rode on out. But you, Jase, yo're different. Don't you figger it's about time to ride under the name yore dad gave you, goin' on twenty-two years ago, come round-up?"

"Always have rode under it," the cowboy answered huskily. "You know what they called me at the last outfit where I was top hand?"

"Spell it out, feller," Boss Macey answered soberly. "I'd like to know."

"Figgered you would, you salty old ramrod," the cowboy growled, and then grinned again. "They called me 'Boss Macey'!" he whispered. "Let's get on back to the Lazy M. She's gettin' late, and it won't take long to stay all night in that old bunk house!"



Vengeance Valley

A "Silver Arrow" Novelette

By William A. Todd

Author of "Rustlers' Crossing," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE HIDDEN ROPE.

LIKE a hidden rattler waiting to strike, treachery lurked in the cabin store at the lonely crossroads. As soon as "Lance" Brewster jingled across the threshold, he sensed the danger.

His friendly greeting was answered by the greasy, fat proprietor with a black scowl. A mongrel under the dusty counter growled threateningly. And a floor board creaked under the weight of a skulker in the back room.

The tow-haired waddy forced a disarming grin to cover up his swift alarm.

Trouble had dogged his trail all the way from the Big Horn Mountains of Wyoming. And now that he was within a few miles of his future home range in the foothills of the Little Rockies of Montana, he was eager for peace.

His tanned features were gaunt from the rigors of a long trail drive. Big for his youth, he hadn't a spare ounce of weight on his wide-shouldered frame. And his blue eyes, wrinkled at the corners from squinting into the sun, were deadly serious.

The cowboy's clothing told the story.

There was a patched bullet hole in his tan ten-gallon hat. His purple silk shirt was poorly mended. His

bullhide chaps were brush-scarred and ripped. He needed new high heels on his stitched cow boots. Only the .45-caliber six-gun hanging low on his right thigh seemed to have weathered the journey in good shape.

The perfect functioning of that clean, oiled weapon meant safety not only for Lance Brewster, but also for his drover crew and five hundred white-faced Herefords. The Colt slept with him. In rain he rode with the gun wrapped in oiled rags under his slicker. There were no notches cut in its walnut butt.

But the weapon had seen red-roaring action, and Lance was hoping that he'd never again have to draw it against human foe.

Now, halting before the scowling storekeeper, the puncher made a bid for friendship.

"I'm Lance Brewster, neighbor," he said simply. "My Silver Arrow herd is headin' up this way to the valley over the ridge. I'm digging in for the winter, an' mebbe for the next hundred years."

The fat-jowled hombre narrowed his small pink eyes and hunched his shoulders. He was not a pleasant sight in his greasy khaki shirt and grimy black pants. His paunch pressed against the inside of the counter. He had curly brown hair that fell over his low brow, and a sneering thick-lipped mouth.

"Yuh ain't no neighbor o' mine, *yet,*" the proprietor growled, "an' I'm thinkin' yuh never will be. That valley over the ridge is took. We don't cotton ter strange drovers around hyar, young fellar. Yuh best turn yore critters an' go back whar yuh come from."

Lance didn't bat an eyelash.

"What cow outfit beat me to the valley?" he asked tonelessly.

"I ain't sayin'," the storekeeper replied. "What's more, I ain't sellin' yuh no supplies, because my regular customers need 'em all. I'm tellin' yuh ter move on."

The dog under the counter growled again, and the floor board in the back room creaked.

Lance felt a wave of hot anger go through him. He realized that his coming had not surprised the storekeeper. Some coyote had warned the man and told him what to say to the Silver Arrow boss. If Lance took offense, he'd have a fight on his hands. And a bullet from the back room would snuff out his life.

"This is a pretty big country, hombre," Lance said coolly. "There's millions of acres of free range. I drove here because the nesters got to be a plague in Wyoming. I won't be leavin' the Little Rockies for a spell, but I'll be leavin' your store pronto."

He turned to the door. His spine was icy cold, expecting the shock of a dozen shotgun slugs. But if he lunged aside and tried to seek shelter behind a barrel or the iron stove, it would be inviting the blast of lead from the back room. And the chances were that Lance would die before he could draw.

He held his breath until he reached the door. His ears were alert for a cue to action. But it did not come from behind him in the cabin. He caught the beat of hoofs on the trail outside. He knew he heard it before the storekeeper, and he stepped on outside to the veranda and quickly shifted along the log wall to get out of the way of the door.

Glancing up the rocky ridge trail, the puncher spied four horsemen coming hard. The morning sunlight was full in their faces as they squinted to identify Lance's blue roan standing at the hitch rail.

Their features were plain to his eyes, and he recognized their leader with a shock that held him rooted to the spot.

"Jack Devlin!" the Silver Arrow boss gasped. "An' his brother, Maverick!"

Mounted on a long-legged sorrel cayuse, Jack Devlin was reining to a halt. He looked well on the big balky mount, in his white beaver-skin hat, buckskin vest, and calfskin chaps. Fancy clothes were his specialty.

He was handsome—too handsome. Young, slim-hipped, and broad-shouldered, Jack had been quite a hand with the girls back in Wyoming. Few suspected that his bronzed skin, high cheek bones, straight nose, and black eyes were the result of an Indian strain in the Devlin family.

His brother, "Maverick," who followed him on a paint pony, showed that strain plainly. Maverick seemed to be all Indian. He was shorter in stature than Jack and inclined to be squat. Hatless, his hair fell straight and black. Clad in dirty rags and wearing moccasins, he sat hunched in the saddle. His almond eyes darted at the surrounding boulders and brush as he held a Winchester across his lap.

It was Maverick's treacherous bushwhacking that had set the law on the Devlin family in Wyoming and sent them fleeing to Montana. With them had come a third brother, "Monte" Devlin, a ruthless gambler and professional gunman. And the reason that Monte was missing now was due to Lance Brewster's efforts. Lance had captured him in a trail battle, and turned him over to a hanging committee.

Now, as Jack and Maverick halted up the ridge, the Silver Arrow boss knew that they were gunning for him and were afraid of him. They had tasted his lead before. They wanted no more of it in a shooting duel. Their care in approaching the log store was evidence that they suspected danger.

That explained the storekeeper's enmity. It also was the reason for a hiding gunman in the back room. The Devlins had prepared a trap. And Lance must have avoided it by coming on ahead of his drover pards to arrange for grub supplies.

But the Silver Arrow boss was not completely free of the snare yet. He was one against the two Devlins and their two tough friends. He had also to think about the fat storekeeper and the other hombre in the back room. Against six guns, he had no more chance than a lone hound against a circling wolf pack.

Standing in the shadow of the veranda roof, he doubted that Jack and Maverick Devlin could see him, for the sun was in their eyes. But they seemed to recognize his stocky blue roan. They had halted. He saw them swing down from their saddles, and draw their broncs to the cover of brush and boulder.

Lance realized that to hesitate meant death. He had to act before the men in the log store were aware that the Devlin brothers had arrived.

With a bound, Lance went across the veranda, leaped to the ground, and jumped for the saddle. He cracked his roan on the rump with a left hand as he went up to the seat, gathering the dangling reins with a right.

The animal was off like a frightened deer, bolting down the trail, with Lance hanging low. Head turned back, he saw the tail of one of the outlaw broncs just disappearing behind a boulder. He was sure that the Devlins had not seen him

in their business of hiding their mounts. Lance's roan swerved with the trail into timber, and he was gone from sight of the store.

A hard grin twisted his lips.

"They'll think that they were seein' a spook when they line their guns on the hitch rail, an' find the roan gone," he said. "But I'm lettin' no grass grow under my feet."

He rode on down the ridge as if black hornets were after him. On such footing, his blue roan had never failed him. It was a short-legged animal, as quick as lightning, trained to avoid the sharp horns of steers in rannicky herds. And Lance was accustomed to give the bronc its head.

Neither the waddy nor the animal detected the peril at the bottom of the steep grade where the buckbrush flanked their route. Lance was looking back for pursuit. The bronc failed to see a rope lying directly across its path, because dirt had been thrown over it hastily, and the men who held each end were hidden deep in the foliage at either side. The roan's pounding hoofs deafened its quick ears.

As Lance started to pass, the rope lifted to the cayuse's front legs. The bronc stumbled. The puncher was thrown up. With a sharp cry, he spied this foes, but it was too late. His horse went down, head-first, right shoulder striking into a patch of thick hazelbrush, rump lifting up.

Like an arrow from a bow, the Silver Arrow boss shot forward, clawing the air. He piled into branches, crashed through, and landed with a jolt that shook him from head to toe. Blinded by the slashing foliage, he rolled over, kicking himself out of the tangle of brush, trying to find the gun that had been torn from his holster.

"Got him!" a husky voice was shouting. "I caught the puncher square!"

"Give him a dose o' buckshot!" another yelled. "He deserves it!"

"He's down in the brush!" a third cried. "Mebbe his neck is busted."

Lance froze. The wind had almost been knocked out of him, and he felt sick in the pit of his stomach. His shirt was in ribbons. His cheeks stung from a half dozen scratches, and he wasn't certain but that he'd loosened two front teeth.

It was the loss of his six-gun that worried him most. He was helpless. If he moved, a load from a scatter-gun might chaw through the brush and rake him to shreds. Six-gun lead would finish him if he staggered to flight.

The excited tone of his enemies and their rube remarks were not the language of gun-slingers. And he listened tensely.

"The hoss ain't hurt," one of them called. "It's gettin' up."

"Forget that bronc, Jake, an' go see if the rider's daid," another ordered.

"Go yoreself, pap," Jake's voice answered. "Yuh fixed up the trick ter upset him."

"Let's shoot inter the thicket an' have done with it," a third hombre suggested.

"Don't do that, Simon," the older man's voice warned. "Yuh'll scare the sheep."

Sheep! Lance raised to an elbow. Were those men on the trail part of a sheep-herding outfit? If so, they represented a worse danger to the Silver Arrow cattle than the Devlin brothers. The valley that Lance aimed to settle on the western side of the ridge was knee-deep in grass, and he needed every blade of it for winter fodder. He couldn't let a band of sheepmen beat him to the

range. He might not find another pasture before the snows set in.

His eyes searched the ground desperately, and they found what they sought. It was the dark walnut butt of his six-gun. The weapon lay ten feet away in the brush, barrel resting against a dried log. But just over the log was the trail. And Lance could see the boots of his foes.

CHAPTER II.

FIGHTING LINGO.

FIVE miles east of the ridge, in a rocky draw where five hundred Herefords had fallen to their knees in rest, a bald-headed, bow-legged hombre was having a fit of temper. His name was "Stovepipe," because he was the Silver Arrow cook, but he didn't look like a hash-slinger now.

He had thrown aside his stained apron, and he stood revealed in old leather chaps and checkered shirt, six-gun slung on his right thigh. His right fingers hung like claws over the butt of the weapon. His left fist was doubled until the knuckles showed white. Purple in the face with rage, right cheek bulged with a big chaw of tobacco, this old hairpin couldn't think of enough threats to hurl at the hombre opposite him.

"Yuh addle-brained jackass! Yuh tenderfoot cheat! Yuh rat-tailed, sod-bustin', long-necked, cow-faced, double-crossin' nester yokel! Draw yore gun an' fight—or give me back my chocolate sweetenin'."

The object of the cook's wrath was an awkward overgrown youth in a pair of woolly, mail-order chaps that were three sizes too small. His red-flannel shirt sleeves were rolled to the elbow after the style of a farmer. He wore his flat-brimmed hat pulled down close to his big ears, but the headpiece didn't hide the fact that he needed a hair cut, badly. He didn't know how to wear his cartridge belt. His spurs were too long, and his high-heeled boots hurt his feet.

Everything about him suggested a chore boy instead of a cow-puncher. There was no hiding the secret that he had migrated westward with a nester uncle before attaching himself to the Silver Arrow outfit. He couldn't shoot. He was a bad rider. But his heart was set on becoming a tough cowhand, and nobody could fire him.

"I can't give yuh back the sweetenin'," this hombre said fearfully. "Me an' Prairie ate it."

"Yuh ate it?" Stovepipe shouted. "Yuh couldn't do such a low-down snake-crawlin' trick! Yuh know I promised Lance ter bake a chocolate cake as soon we got ter the foothills o' the Little Rockies. Give me back that quart can o' sirup afore I commit murder."

The former nester, who was called "Ham" because of his fondness for ham and eggs, swallowed guiltily.

"Gosh, I'm plumb sorry, Stovepipe," he said mournfully, "but that can must have broke out o' the packs. Me an' Prairie found it at the drags. We didn't know it belonged ter yuh. We ate——"

"Don't say another word!" the irate cook yelled, earing back the hammer of his gun. "Yuh stole it all by yore lonesome. Don't try ter pass it off on Prairie. I give yuh one hour ter get me another can o' chocolate sirup. Yuh got one more hour ter live. Vamose!"

Ham staggered back, beads of sweat on his brow.

"Don't shoot, Stovepipe!" he exclaimed. "Yuh said one hour. But whar kin I get the sweetenin' in that time?"

"I don't care whar yuh git it, but

git it!" Stovepipe shrilled. "Mebbe I shouldn't let yuh escape me now. I think I'll start by shootin' yore ears off."

"I'm goin' now!" Ham cried in alarm, whirling. "Hold yore lead!"

He leaped toward a hammer-headed brown bronc, caught a spur in a clump of sage, and fell flat on his face. Up with a jump, he lunged for the neck of his horse and caught the animal in the act of rearing. By sheer strength, Ham pulled the horse down to earth, and scrambled into the saddle.

Crash! Stovepipe's six-gun thundered, burying a bullet in the dirt behind the cayuse's rear hoofs.

"Help!" the former nester shrieked. "Prairie! Stovepipe is killin' me!"

His bronc bolted in panic, and Ham clutched the pommel to stay on. He had a glimpse of a tall lean figure in buckskin ducking into hiding behind a group of cows at the farther end of the draw. That man was "Prairie," who had been one of the best scouts in the West before joining the Silver Arrow Ranch as a foreman.

Wise in the lore of the wilds, cool-headed, and loyal to the core, Prairie was not now coming to Ham's aid. For Prairie had helped in the theft of that quart of chocolate sirup and hadn't the courage to face Stovepipe's wrath.

Ham's big cayuse sped westward up the draw on the stampede, making for the timber where it might brush its rider off with an overhanging limb. The awkward drover hung on for dear life. He was more afraid of Stovepipe than the bronc, but on reaching the timber, he felt that he was out of bullet range, and became more aware of his immediate peril.

A bunch of dangling cedar struck him in the face. He ducked. A tree grazed his leg. A howl tore from his throat. The bronc leaped a fallen log, almost hurling Ham out of the saddle. His toes shook out of the stirrups, and he clutched the trunk of the horse with his long legs, spurs pricking its flanks.

With a squeal, the animal crashed into brush, bucked its way through, and raced on through the forest, dodging trees.

"Stop!" Ham yelled. "Whoa-oa! Help!"

Driven to greater panic by the terrified shouts, the cayuse emerged from the woods at breakneck speed, and bolted down a long slope to a second open draw. The animal could not halt now. Its momentum carried it on.

Ham saw the big herd of gray sheep on the floor of the draw, and he whooped in horror. His hands seemed to be frozen to the saddle pommel. He couldn't let go, despite the fact that he was sure that a collision between his bronc and the sheep was inevitable.

Shutting his eyes and gritting his teeth, he was carried on down the slope, listening to the pounding of the hoofs under him and the frightened bawling of the sheep ahead.

Ham didn't see the woollies scatter like leaves before a hurricane. A gun crashed in the distance. Dogs barked. His horse galloped on, swerving right and left through the stampeding flock, with cow-pony skill.

Before the former sod-buster realized it, he was across the draw, and rocketing into brush and woods again. His eyes popped open. His horse plowed into a deep thicket that slowed it down.

Exhausted, the animal slowed feebly to a halt, and stood panting for wind.

Amazed at his salvation, Ham still gripped the saddle horn, trying to

figure it out. A grin stole across his freckled face.

"Gee!" he exclaimed. "I rode the critter ter a fare-yuh-well!"

Cautiously, he moved his toes into the stirrups, leaned forward, and gathered in the dangling reins. A feeling of triumph swept him. He threw back his shoulders, and gazed up the cliff of a rocky ridge. His memory was pricked by an idea.

"Lance went up along that ridge lookin' fer a tradin' post," Ham said aloud. "Mebbe he's still thar. I'll get Stovepipe's chocolate, an' everythin' will be fine ag'in."

In his eagerness to make amends, he forgot about the sheep behind him. It did not strike him as odd that a flock should be driving through the wild frontier country. Ham was the kind of hombre who took everything for granted. He spurred the bronc, and it refused to move.

"Tuckered out," the former nester grunted, and swung down from the saddle.

On foot, he started up the ridge to find the trail that Lance had traveled, leading the cayuse by the reins.

The climb was long and hard. Ham's big feet hadn't yet grown accustomed to cow boots, but he endured the torture out of sheer pride. Reaching the trail that slanted along the side of the ridge, he inspected his mount in hope of being able to ride. But the horse was done in and staggering.

Ham decided to leave the animal. And remove his boots. And his heavy woolly chaps. Wet with sweat, he didn't know how much farther he'd have to journey. It was not the first time that he'd gone barefoot. But his feet had grown tender after a month of riding.

Carrying his boots in hand, chaps slung over his shoulder, he stepped up the trail, eying the gravelly spots, and avoiding rocks. It wasn't long before he cached the chaps in brush, intending to recover them on the way back.

He was unaware that Lance had already gone down the trail and run into a sheep-herder trap. Ham was eager for sight of the trading post. His first glimpse of the log store was a disappointment, for Lance's blue roan was not at the hitch rail.

"Mebbe he went on ter the valley on the other side of the ridge," Ham said aloud, halting to pull on his boots for show.

A grave difficulty presented itself. Ham's feet seemed to have grown larger. His boots were damp. It was impossible to get them on. Tugging and groaning, he worked for several minutes, and finally gave up.

"It's a good thing that the boss ain't at the store," Ham growled. "I'll dry these boots out in the sun, an' soak my toes in cold water. Mebbe I kin talk the storekeeper out of a trade fer a larger size."

Hopeful, the former nester went on up the trail, six-gun swinging at his hip. Barefoot, in need of a hair cut, in waist overalls, and sleeves rolled, he would have been taken for a nester or sheep-herder in any country.

It was no wonder that the hidden guns covering the store veranda let Ham pass. He knew nothing about the near presence of Jack and Maverick Devlin. Mounting the steps, he thudded across the veranda with the noise of a bear. He failed to detect the jingle of retreating spurs within the log store.

Ham entered to find a greasy, fat hombre standing behind a dusty counter. A sly grin curled the storekeeper's thick lips.

"Howdy, pardner," the man hailed

the former nester. "Which way did yuh come?"

Ham halted, eyes lifting to the shelves of canned goods. "I climbed part o' the ridge until I struck the trail," he said. "Have yuh got any chocolate sirup?"

"I shore have," the fat fellow replied, chuckling. "Whar's the sheep?"

Ham frowned. "Sheep?" he asked.

"Shore," the storekeeper said. "Ain't yuh drivin' them woollies ter the valley over yonder ridge?"

The red of anger flushed Ham's face. "Are yuh callin' me a low-down sheep-herder?" he demanded, remembering that it was one of Stovepipe's favorite epithets. "If yuh are, yuh better watch out, tenderfoot! I'm a hard-boiled cowhand. An' my brand is the Silver Arrow."

The storekeeper's pink eyes went wide, then swiftly narrowed to slits.

"Are yuh aimin' ter double-cross us?" he growled. "Or is this yore idea of a funny joke."

Ham swaggered up to the counter. "Fetch down yore chocolate sirup in quart cans," he ordered, "or there's goin' ter be trouble."

"Trouble is right," the storekeeper snapped, and his hand darted under the counter for a weapon.

But Ham was not to be caught napping. As a tough cow-puncher, he was taking no sass from a rube storekeeper. His suspicions already aroused by the fat fellow's change of tone, the former nester lunged across the counter.

CHAPTER III.

GUN GANTLET.

IN the brush at the foot of the ridge trail, Lance Brewster measured the distance to his lost six-gun. The weapon lay against a log, beyond which the boots of three hombres could be seen. That log would afford a slight shelter, if Lance could get behind it before a blast of shotgun lead tagged him.

He figured his chances, listening to the sheepmen arguing about his fate. They were about to enter the brush when a shot crashed in the distance, halting them.

Lance heard the explosion, and placed it not three hundred yards away to the east. And following the echo, a terrified bawling set up, the yapping of dogs, the excited shouting of a man.

"The punchers are after our herd!" one of the sheepmen on the trail exclaimed.

Lance did not hesitate. Rearing to his hands and knees, he scuttled toward the log and dived behind it. He was not a moment too soon.

"Kill the cowboy in the brush!" a herder on the trail yelled.

Crash! A shotgun roared, and a dozen lead slugs swept over the log and Lance's head, raking the brush, cutting branches, and showering leaves down.

Lance snatched up his six-gun, thumbed the hammer, and fired straight into the sky, war whooping wildly to scare his foes.

A howl of alarm was their reply, and he heard them bolt off the trail, slamming bullets behind them at the foliage. But Lance was well protected by the log. They could not see him. Their boots pounded away, until the sound was swallowed up in the louder bawling of sheep.

"The woollies are stampeding," Lance told himself, poking his head above the log.

He couldn't see the three herders who had trapped him. They apparently had ducked into a clump of trees, east of which their sheep seemed to be grazing a low valley. There was no more shooting in that

direction, but the yapping of shepherd dogs told Lance that the trouble was still raging.

Springing to his feet, he waded out to the trail, and found his blue roan standing stiff-legged not far away. The bronc's left shoulder was covered with dirt, where it had landed, its fall cushioned by the brush. The animal's teeth were bared, its ears twisted back, as if it regarded Lance as an enemy. Plainly, the horse couldn't account for its fall and was suspicious of man.

Lance spoke to it, moving slowly forward. The roan backed up. The puncher leaped and caught it by the bridle. He had not time to make friends. Swinging to the saddle, he let the animal throw three bucks, and then gave it his spurs.

Time was at a premium for the Silver Arrow outfit. Lance drove the angry roan hard down the trail with quirt and spur, guiding it due south to where the five hundred Herefords were resting in the draw.

He rode with the noise of the stampeding sheep echoing in his ears. He couldn't account for their panic, for he didn't know about Ham's wild ride through the flock. Lance put the sheep-herder's trouble down to some unknown feud with cowmen and figured that his capture had been due to a feud.

What worried him most was that the sheep seemed to be heading up over the ridge to the wide valley basin where he planned to winter his herd. He recalled that the storekeeper had told him that the valley was taken. But the fat fellow had refused to name the outfit in possession.

"The Devlins must be in cahoots with the sheepmen," Lance told himself. "It's the only explanation. They're figuring on a finish fight between the Silver Arrow outfit an' the herders. Then they plan to ride in to tally scalps an' collect the stock. Scum!" he ejaculated.

Skirting a shoulder of the ridge, the cowboy spurred through a clump of pines, and into a brushy gully. He rode hard down it, emerging upon the floor of a long, narrow draw. With relief, he saw the Silver Arrow Herefords before him. A yell tore from his throat as he made out two horsemen standing near a picket line. Their heads were thrown up, as if they were listening to distant echoes.

"Prairie!" Lance shouted. "Stovepipe! Tighten yore cinches. We're drivin' fast. Where's Ham?"

The tall scout and the bald-headed cook turned to their broncs as the Silver Arrow boss rode in.

"What's that ruckus over yonder?" Prairie called. "Can it be sheep?"

"A hull flock o' them," Lance replied swiftly. "It looks like we're in for a race to get to our valley. We've got to move fast, boys. We'll take that pass over the ridge due west of us. The sheep-herders seem to be having some trouble."

Stovepipe wiped his brow with a blue bandanna handkerchief and spat a brown stream at his pile of firewood.

"Lance, I hate ter tell yuh," the cook said meekly, "but thar's only one fool in Montana what could cause all that commotion."

Lance's jaw hardened. "Ham?" he asked.

"Ham-an'-eggs!" Stovepipe nodded. "He got caught on a runaway bronc what headed due north inter the timber. Me an' Prairie was jest figurin' ter go after him, but we hated ter leave our stock."

Lance's heart sank. "This is a fine time for him to try to ride a spooky bronc," he snapped. "I just

ran into Jack an' Maverick Devlin up at the store on the ridge."

Prairie turned swiftly from his cinch strap. "The bushwhacker!" the tall hawk-faced scout gasped. "I thought that he an' Jack Devlin were down on the Crow Reservation gettin' an herb cure for the slugs yuh put inter 'em."

"Wolves heal fast, Prairie," the Silver Arrow boss said tensely. "We're up against the toughest proposition ever. There's no law in these parts. We don't know where the other ranches lay, if there are any, an' those sheep-herders are gunnin' for us. Yuh an' Stovepipe have got to get our herd moving over the ridge all by yore lonesome."

"It's impossible," the cook protested. "If Ham is daid, there's no helpin' him. I'll take the blame for it, Lance. Let me go look. Yo're worth two of me in the saddle."

"Yuh were a good cowhand once, Stovepipe," the Silver Arrow boss replied. "Show yore stuff again. The herd is well trained. The old lead steers will help out."

"We'll do our best, Lance," Prairie said. "But take a rifle with yuh. An' remember that Maverick Devlin is Injun. Don't give him a chance to sneak up on yuh."

Lance took the Winchester that Prairie drew from his saddle scabbard and handed him. Pivoting his roan on its hind legs, he set off across the draw at a hard gallop. He didn't hear Stovepipe's groan, or Prairie's remark about a can of chocolate sirup. The scout was taking the cook to task for having driven Ham from camp.

Lance struck into the timber without slackening pace. He had his bronc well in hand once more, and knew that he could count on it. On bad ground the animal was at its best, for it could turn quickly and dodge.

Lance didn't know what sort of fight he was getting into. Ahead of him the bawling of the sheep had died away, but the yapping of the dogs still reached his ears. He realized that the stampede of the flock had worked in his favor, because sheep are harder to collect in woods and brush than steers. The loss of time would prevent the herders from driving on over the ridge.

In another fifty yards, Lance sighted the valley at the bottom of the long slope down which Ham had been carried with express train speed on the back of his hammer-headed bronc. The sheep had stampeded eastward up into craggy hills, where the dogs were trying to round them up. Few of the woollies remained in the valley, and they were under the protection of a handful of ragged herders.

Lance dragged his roan to a skidding halt, and rose in his stirrups. He couldn't tell whether the sheepmen had captured his awkward pard. The herders were in an excited conference, pointing northward, and turning to the south, as if expecting a new peril in the latter direction.

They saw the Silver Arrow boss and gave a shout of alarm. Shotguns sprang to their shoulders, and blasted thunderously. But the range was too long for those scatter weapons.

At the prick of a spur, Lance's roan dodged to the left. He heard the buckshot falling short. It alarmed him. And he quirted his horse westward along the rim of the slope, fearing a rifle among the herders.

A yell of rage, and the sheepmen leaped for broncs to give chase.

"Here's a chance I can't miss," the Silver Arrow boss said, and bent over his saddle pommel to race his

roan. "Get goin', hoss! Yuh can beat any cayuse those tenderfeet ever forked."

A six-gun blasted from the valley, and a bullet whined over Lance's head. That worried him. There was always a chance that a shot might tag him. He couldn't turn back to the south and the draw where Prairie and Stovepipe were getting the Herefords on the march. And over the ridge to the west lay the valley basin that the Silver Arrow meant to settle. Lance galloped northwest, knowing that up the ridge in that direction stood the log store where the Devlins were meeting.

A desperate plan took shape in his mind as he pounded down the slope.

If he could trick the sheepmen into battle against the Devlin gang, it would cause a delay that would give Prairie and Stovepipe a chance to reach the valley basin. In addition, it might start a feud that would settle the hash of the Devlin clan. But there was the danger of being caught himself between two fires.

Lance had to risk it. He had to find Ham. And the plans of the Devlins must be spiked at all costs. Sooner or later, the sheepmen must go to war with the outlaws, even if they were dealing with them now. And Lance meant to hurry that battle.

As his roan reached the valley floor, Lance swerved it due west to the trail where he had been captured. Behind him, five of the herders were hard after him, yowling with vengeance.

He sent his roan plunging into the brush. Out of sight, he went on to the trail up the side of the ridge and slowed down. The sound of crackling branches told him that the herders were coming on. He drew a six-gun, fired twice into the air, and spurred on up the ridge.

It was then that he heard the crash of shots in the log store a mile away. At first, he thought it was the sheepmen replying to his fire. But the reports were too far away. The shooting was at the head of the trail, at the crossroads where the store stood.

"Ham!" Lance gasped. "The fool must have reached the Devlins. They'll slaughter him."

He had no choice now. He couldn't turn off and let the sheepmen pass him on the trail. His pard was in danger at the store.

Lance gave his roan its head, and reloaded the two empty chambers in his six-gun. Every shot had to count.

CHAPTER IV.

DEATH ORDERS.

INSIDE the log store, Ham bit off an oversized chaw of trouble when he lunged across the counter to stop the fat proprietor from getting a weapon. Ham had more than enough strength in his arms and legs. And he had the courage of a maddened grizzly when aroused, but he was easy meat for a gunman.

With one blow of the flat of his hand, Ham knocked the storekeeper spinning to the floor. He saw the horse pistol that the fellow had grabbed, fall to the planks, its hammer knocking against the wood. And the weapon exploded with a crash that shook the cabin.

Then things began to happen quickly.

There was a howl from the storekeeper, quickly followed by an enraged growl. And a yellow mongrel hound came leaping up from under the counter, lips drawn back, eyes red. Before Ham could jump back,

the dog was at him, its claws digging into the counter.

The animal's teeth closed on Ham's arm, just above the elbow, where he had rolled up his sleeves. And although the thick roll of cloth nearly shielded the bite, the fangs broke through to the former nester's skin.

"Yow-ee-ee!" Ham yelled, whirling about, trying to sling the animal from him.

As he turned, the door to the back room burst open, and a tall hook-nosed gunman appeared. The white butts of two bone-handled weapons were in his hands. His lips were drawn back over glistening teeth. Ham recognized him by his black sateen shirt and black bullhide chaps. It was the hombre whom the Silver Arrow outfit had turned over for hanging to a camp of freighters and nesters on the bank of the Yellowstone River.

It was like seeing a ghost for Ham. Although the Silver Arrow outfit had not waited at the Yellowstone to see "Monte" Devlin gasp his last in a tight noose, they had been pretty sure that he was dead. They had been driving westward since then, and had no news of his escape. They didn't know that Jack and Maverick had turned up to rescue their brother.

"Monte!" Ham gasped.

"Get rid o' that dawg an' go fer yore gun, tinhorn!" Monte Devlin snarled. "I'm givin' yuh a chace, like I give everybody."

But Ham wanted no chance for his six-gun. He knew that Monte could beat him. With the hound dog still clinging to his left arm. Ham caught the animal by the scruff of his neck with a right hand, and tore the mongrel loose.

"Take yore varmint an' eat it!" Ham roared, and he hurled the squealing hound through the air.

Monte leaped back, his six-guns roaring. He would have killed Ham, but that his aim was disturbed. The hound struck him full in the face, and Monte Devlin fell into the back room, dropping his guns to tear the biting dog off him.

But a new menace confronted Ham at that moment. He remembered the fat storekeeper behind the counter, and turned none too soon. His eyes glimpsed the man staggering to his feet. The big horse pistol was in the fellow's hand again, and he was trying to recock it.

Ham charged the counter with a bellow of wrath. He saw the storekeeper raise the heavy weapon high to hit him on the skull. Ham's left arm lifted to ward off the blow. The gun barrel came down with a force that almost broke the bone below the elbow. It paralyzed Ham's entire left arm, but his right was still good.

With a vicious swing, the Silver Arrow drover struck the storekeeper full in the mouth, knocking out his teeth and sending him floundering back into a shelf. The cans of food toppled from their perches, and hailed down, bouncing off the fat fellow head. Screaming in pain, he fell to the floor, and Ham turned the counter over on top of him.

Now, there was the pound of boots on the porch. The Silver Arrow drover whirled to see Jack Devlin, Maverick, and two unshaven gunmen charging the entrance of the store. Ham stooped, picked up two cans of tomatoes and hurled them through the front door. He caught Jack Devlin full in the stomach, and the handsome outlaw pitched forward with an agonized grunt, shooting wildly into the log building.

Behind Jack, Maverick Devlin

leaped out of the way of the second tomato can, and hid behind the outside wall of the store. The two toughs behind Maverick leaped to drag the winded Jack out of harm's way.

Ham didn't lose a minute. His eyes flicked to the scattered can goods on the floor, searching for brown wrappings. He clawed up two quart tins, and bounded toward the back room.

There, just within the doorway, Monte Devlin was clubbing a biting, clawing mongrel off him. Ham leaped over the gunman, dived across a small room, and out a back door. He fell in a sprawl in the open, picked himself up, raced on to the brush and rocks.

Back inside the store, Monte Devlin's six-gun roared, smashing a bullet into the mongrel's skull. The tall hook-nosed outlaw staggered to his feet, breathing heavily. Turning, he glanced out the back door of the store, but Ham had vanished in the brush.

"Monte!" a voice was shouting from the front room.

"Jack!" the eldest Devlin replied. "Where's Maverick?"

The ragged figure of Maverick Devlin appeared in the doorway, Winchester in hand; and behind him staggered Jack Devlin, holding his stomach.

"Did Brewster get away?" Jack Devlin gasped.

"Brewster?" Monte questioned scornfully. "That was the big nester kid that he hired for a drover. I let Brewster go on out the front door, a half hour ago, so that Maverick could put a rifle bullet through him. What's wrong with yuh fellows?"

Jack Devlin cursed. "We saw his roan, but then it vanished. We were sure that Brewster was hidin' behind the store, waitin' for us. We didn't know if he'd gunned yuh down or not. Then, that sheep-herder came along. We figured it was a trick."

"Sheep-herder nothin'," Monte snarled. "It was the nester drover. He was barefoot ter fool us. The Silver Arrow must have run into the sheep-herders an' talked them into somethin'." He glanced at Maverick. "Go bushwhack that big tenderfoot. Don't let him get away. An' when yo're through with him, Maverick, lift the scalp of Prairie an' Stovepipe. I give yuh free range, hombre. Do yore stuff."

Maverick's lips curled. Without answering, he moved to the back door of the store and vanished outside on moccasined feet. This was a job that he thoroughly enjoyed. His Indian heritage made him as deadly as a stalking panther in the woods. His rifle stock was already notched for a dozen men. Maverick worked best alone, when his brothers held no rein on him.

A scowl furrowed Monte Devlin's brow, and he walked to the front room where two outlaw aids were dragging the fat storekeeper from under the counter. Monte stared at the bruised and cut proprietor, who held a hand over his bashed mouth.

"Yuh shore fixed things fine fer us," Monte growled. "I thought yuh said those sheepmen were ready to fight any cow outfit for that valley."

The storekeeper spat out a tooth. "They told me they would," he whined. "I promised 'em free grub all winter. They was run out o' the foothills back yonder by cow outfits. They're death on punchers, Monte. I counted on 'em hard."

Monte snorted and turned to Jack. "Yuh shouldn't have let Brewster get away," he said harshly.

"That hombre has fooled us too many times. He's wise to this store now. He won't drive by hyar. He'll take the pass to the south. We've got to stop him there. Bring up the hosses!"

"Wait a minute!" the storekeeper cried. "Yuh can't leave me alone hyar. I've got ter have protection. I made a deal with yuh. I ain't goin' ter fight off them sheepmen an' the cow outfit, too."

Monte's shoulders hunched. "Yuh'll do what we say!" he snapped. "Yuh bungled this. It's up ter yuh ter make peace with the sheepmen. Go find out whar they're camped. Offer them everything they want."

"Nothin' doin'," the fat fellow said. "I've had enough."

Monte's hands dropped to the white handles of his weapons.

"Git out, Jack," Monte said. "I'll catch up with you hombres, later. I've got a little matter to settle here. Go over the ridge, up the valley."

"What are yuh goin' ter do?" the fat storekeeper screamed.

Jack Devlin chuckled and went outside, followed by his two tough aids.

Monte's face was as hard as granite. "We can't trust yuh no more, Fats," he said. "Yo're better dead than alive. I never did like the looks of yuh."

"Yuh can't murder me!" the storekeeper cried, staggering back.

"There's a gun on the floor there," Monte said. "I'll give yuh a chance."

"It ain't loaded," the fat hombre gasped.

Outside, there was the thud of hoofs as Jack Devlin and two outlaws rode on up the trail over the ridge to the valley basin that the Silver Arrow outfit planned to settle. Monte grinned at their departure. He wanted no witnesses to the duel.

He was running in hard luck, and he meant to take no more chances. Lance Brewster had been winning too often. Monte meant to stack the deck from now on.

"That gun is loaded, all right," he said, letting go of his gun handles. "Make yore play."

The storekeeper's fat face went white. His breath came in gasps. A tremor shook him. And then he dived for the horse pistol.

CHAPTER V.

THE BUSHWHACK TRAIL.

RACING up the ridge trail, Lance Brewster heard the crash of two shots from .45-caliber six-guns, the explosions so close together that the thunder was one resounding echo. A man screamed in agony. And then there was dead silence.

Lance swerved his bronc off the road and into the rocks and brush near the top of the ridge. His heart was in his mouth as he leaped from the saddle. That could not have been Ham's scream, but he knew that his pard was not shooting. It was a gunman's fire, an hombre who was double-heeled.

The Silver Arrow boss hid his bronc and plunged ahead on foot. In twenty yards, he rounded an outcropping of rock and was in view of the cabin store. One bronc stood at the hitch rack, reins dangling. But Lance was not to be fooled.

He waited, and his ears caught the jingle of spurs. A man was coming out of the store to the porch. He was a tall, dark hombre, dressed in black sateen shirt and chaps of the same color. He was blowing the powder smoke from two guns. The brim of his hat shielded his face as he halted to reload the spent cham-

bers in his white bone-handled weapons.

Lance recognized him with a start. "Monte Devlin!" he gasped.

Astonished, he watched his foe holster his deadly guns and take up a notch in his belt. How the man had escaped hanging on the Yellowstone River, Lance could not guess. The presence of Jack and Maverick in the foothills of the Little Rockies might have accounted for it. But where were they now? Hidden up the trail at the north of the store, waiting for Monte, who had been the gunman in the back room?

Lance holstered his drawn weapon and eased it up and down in its holster to insure a swift draw. His jaw was hard, his eyes as cold as ice.

He watched Monte descend the porch steps and move to his bronc. The tall outlaw stood a moment, staring down the trail of the ridge, then glanced to the north. He lifted a toe to the stirrup.

Then Lance stepped out from the rocks and brush, fifty feet away from his foe.

"Where are yuh goin', Monte?" Lance called tonelessly.

Monte Devlin froze. He didn't turn his head to look behind him. He seemed to recognize the voice of the Silver Arrow boss. Slowly, he removed his left hand from the saddle pommel and withdrew his foot from the stirrup.

"Long time no see, Brewster," Monte said, still without turning.

"An' the last time, Monte," Lance replied. "My gun is in its holster."

Monte stiffened. "Yo're luck can't last forever," he growled, as if speaking to himself.

"Show yore cards, Monte," Lance replied. "I'm bettin' a pair of bullets."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when Monte Devlin whirled. But Lance was expecting it. He knew the reputation of this outlaw, had seen him in action with guns, and could not be tricked.

His sharp eyes noted that Monte was going for only one weapon, the one on his right side, in order to concentrate every nerve and muscle upon a single draw. And at the same time, Monte was throwing himself to the left, planning to shoot as he hit the ground on his left side.

Lance was not idle. He bent at the hips, left leg moving forward. His right hand described a short arc, fingers plucking at his holstered gun and whipping it loose. He went down to a right knee as he jerked the barrel up, flicking back the hammer. He kept his finger on the trigger, so that the gun hammer fell without catching on the cocking lever.

There was just that space of time between the shots, the fraction that Lance would have lost if he had let his gun click to cock before triggering. The weapon roared, driving its bullet true to aim at the moving body of Monte Devlin. Lance saw the outlaw shudder and shoot. Monte's lead skinned Lance's cheek, thrown out of aim by Monte's shock in receiving the Silver Arrow lead.

A ghastly grunt came from the tall outlaw's throat as he struck the ground. His eyes were wide open. He tried to lift his gun hand, but it wouldn't move. A rattle sounded in his throat. There was a hole in his black shirt just over the heart. Monte Devlin lean figure jerked. The light went out of his eyes. He was dead.

Lance moved forward, smoking weapon in hand. He had to be sure of his foe this time. But there was no mistake about it. Monte's wound was over his heart.

Gritting his teeth, Lance leaped up on the porch and plunged into the store. A whine of agony drew his attention to the left where scattered can goods lay on the floor, and a counter was turned over on its side. Before it was stretched a ponderously fat man, hand thrown out to the butt of a horse pistol, which was just beyond his grasp.

Lance moved toward him, and dropped to his knees, eying the fatal wounds in the storekeeper's chest.

"Who was it?" the Silver Arrow boss asked quietly. "Monte?"

The fat hombre's eyes flicked open. They were glassy.

"Monte murdered me," he gasped.

"Yuh outlived him," Lance said. "Have yuh seen a big pard of mine? Yuh have nothing to lose by talking. The Devlins double-crossed yuh."

"Maverick's followin' him along the ridge," the storekeeper groaned feebly.

"Maverick!" Lance ejaculated. "Where's Jack Devlin an' those coyotes with him?"

A spasm of coughing took the storekeeper. "The pass!" he gasped. "They're after the——"

His breath cut off short. He was dead.

Lance threw up his head. He heard horses coming up the trail. That would be the sheep-herders. Getting to his feet, he stole across the floor to the back room, passed through it, and darted through the door to the brush.

"Ham got away from them," he said in a low tense voice. "An' Maverick is going to bushwhack him. Maverick will do it, too."

Slipping into the rocks and brush, Lance heard the riders on the trail slowing down. They were wary. They didn't know what awaited them at the store.

Lance kept going, ducking from one heap of rock to another, climbing the back of the ridge swiftly, angling to the south, where he had left his roan hidden in the brush. He got around behind the sheepmen. In another moment, dropping to his hands and knees, he crawled into a thicket and found the roan waiting for him.

On foot, Lance took the horse in tow. Time was getting away from him fast. He skirted through the trees to the trail and came out on it below a shoulder of cliff where the sheepmen would not see his departure.

Throwing himself into the saddle, he gave the bronc his spurs. With a bolt, the horse was away, and going down the trail hard. A horrible fear took possession of him. His ears were tense to catch the echo of a rifle shot. It would mean the death of Ham.

Lance had no way of knowing where his pard was in the timber on the slope of the ridge. It was a temptation to shout and warn him, but he was afraid that Ham would reply and give himself away.

Lance rode hard to the bottom of the trail and swung wide to avoid the valley where the sheep had been stampeded. Then he turned up the ridge again, using quirt and spur to drive the chunky roan to its utmost. He hoped he had got ahead of Ham and Maverick or was cutting between them.

The bronc's hoofs rang on rocks. Branches crackled as Lance crashed through. He made enough noise to warn a hundred foes. Gun in hand, he kept his eyes on the crags and trees. The going was hard. And before Lance was at the top of the ridge, his bronc faltered.

Leaping from the saddle, he let

the bronc stand and went on by himself. Once, he halted to take off his spurs and chaps. Climbing fast, he came to a grassy shelf and halted. There were fifty yards of open ground ahead of him, and he did not dare to cross.

Cocking his six-gun, Lance hearkened to the silence. And his ears caught the cawing of a flock of crows. They were south of him, on the end of the shelf. His eyes turned to see them, and he found the birds flapping off to the north.

"Some passing hombre disturbed them," Lance said. "Was it Ham or Maverick?"

And then, the Silver Arrow boss had his answer. A rabbit raced out of the trees to the north of the open ledge. Lance dropped to the ground, hiding in the tall grass. Removing his hat, he spied a ragged figure appearing from the trees to the north. It was Maverick, hunched over, trotting across the open, Winchester in his hands.

Apparently, Maverick had heard the crows, and figured out why they had flown away. He was hard after Ham, making the most of the open territory to catch up with his quarry.

Lance waited until Maverick was opposite him, not thirty yards away.

Then, gun cocked, the Silver Arrow boss stood up.

"Maverick!" he shouted.

As quick as a wolf, the breed threw himself forward into the tall grass. Lance saw the glint of sunlight on the barrel of Maverick's swerving gun barrel. The Silver Arrow boss did not hesitate. He fired with deadly intent, aiming into the grass where his foe had vanished.

Maverick's rifle cracked, spitting flame a yard long out of the grass. The bullet struck Lance in the left side, and whirled him completely around. He didn't know if he had hit the outlaw bushwhacker with his shot or not. As Lance faced the west again, he fired twice more at the moving grass.

A high-pitched scream lifted. And Maverick's body shot into the air. The outlaw was clawing at his stomach. He tried to turn to flee, but he took no more than two steps before he pitched on his face.

Lance was running toward him, gun ready. He saw the bushwhacker thrashing about in the grass. As the Silver Arrow boss came up, Maverick's struggles stopped. He rolled over on his back, arms outstretched, eyes open wide to the sun.

The puncher gazed down at him.

"Jack's the only one left," Lance said bitterly. "An' he's gone to stop the herd in the pass. That storekeeper told the truth."

His hand went to his left side, which was sticky with crimson. He could feel no pain. Maverick's rifle bullet seemed to have gone right through him, making a clean hole in the flesh below the bottom rib, paralyzing the nerves.

Lance tore open his shirt to examine the wound. It was dangerous if he let it go. Stuffing his neckerchief against the red flow, he lifted his gun belt, and tightened it.

He knew that he could not go for his bronc. His head lifted and he whistled three times. There was no answer from the roan. Lance whistled again. He wasn't sure, but he thought he heard the clatter of hoofs on the rocks down the ridge. For a third time, the puncher set his call.

And then there was a whoop from the south. "Lance!" a voice shouted. "Is that yuh? Who was yuh shootin' at?"

"Ham," the cowboy said disgustedly.

Barefooted, hatless, the overgrown Ham came running along the grassy shelf. He had two dark cans under his right arm. His left hung limply at his side.

"I figured that the Devlins was after me, until I heard yuh whistle," the former nester shouted. "Did yuh know that Monte is alive an' kickin'."

"No, he ain't," Lance replied, steeling himself against the pain that his wound drove through him with the sudden thrust of a knife. "Listen hard now. Don't make no mistake. Prairie an' Stovepipe are drivin' from the draw up through a pass south of here. Get to them quick. Tell them that Jack Devlin an' two gunnies are layin' for them. They can forget Monte, Maverick, an' the sheep-herders."

Ham halted, without seeing the dead bushwhacker. "How kin we forget 'em?" he asked. "What are yuh goin' ter do? Whar's yore bronc?"

"Comin' now," Lance said, turning to whistle again to the blue roan that emerged from the trees across the shelf. "Get goin', hombre. This ain't no time for gabbin'. Put on yore boots an' throw those cans away."

"Nothin' doin'," Ham replied stubbornly. "Thar's chocolate sirup in these cans, an' I ain't facin' Stovepipe without 'em. I lost my boots an' chaps. But I still got my gun."

Lance moved to his roan, catching himself from a stagger. He drew himself to the saddle.

"Vamose!" he snapped angrily. "Yuh know what ter do."

Ham's mouth fell open. "What's wrong with yuh, boss?" he asked. "Yuh look sick."

"So would yuh if yuh could smell the carcass right under yore nose," Lance snapped, spurring his roan off.

He left Ham staring down in astonishment at the body of Maverick Devlin.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GUN WOLVES THAT DIDN'T RUN.

IN ten minutes of riding, Lance Brewster topped the ridge. His mind was on the last of the Devlin clan. He wasn't thinking of the view that he had been waiting to see for almost two months. Quite unexpected, he found a full panorama of the valley basin that Prairie had found for the Silver Arrow outfit.

And Lance could not help halting in surprise at the beauty of it. He forgot the smarting pain of his wound. And for a moment, he forgot his last foe.

Below him stretched an enormous basin knee-deep in grass turned tan by the summer's sun. For fifty miles, the pasture was free of woods and hills. To the north, the Little Rockies reared up into the blue sky, their peaks glistening with silver from the first snow of autumn. In the deep timber of those mountain sides was enough game and fish to supply a dozen towns with food.

To the south, the foothills rolled toward the distant Yellowstone River, and to the cattle trails to the railroad junctions. There were no other ranches, no villages, no mining camps within a hundred miles to encroach upon Lance's territory. And the range was free for the taking.

"Prairie couldn't have done better," the Silver Arrow boss said aloud.

And the sound of his own voice warned him that the fight for this valley was not finished.

He sent his eyes down the slope of the ridge, searching for sign of Jack Devlin, but not finding it. To the south, not many miles along the

ridge, lay the pass through which the Herefords would come. Lance turned in that direction, figuring that Jack and the two-gun wolves had got ahead of him. And since he'd make better time on the valley floor, he guided the bronc at an angle down the slope.

Now and then, his head swam, and he bit his lips to kill the pain of Maverick's bullet. He knew that he needed all his strength and calm nerves for good shooting. The jolting of his bronc kept his wound open, and he clamped his left hand to his side.

"It won't be long now," he gritted. "The sooner they spot me the better."

Fearing that he might not hold out, he turned the roan straight down the grade, and let it run its course to the valley floor, where riding would be easier. A dizzy sensation took him, and he had to grab the horn of the saddle. He counted the rods of travel, doubting that he'd be able to go on much farther.

"I should have told Ham to stay with me," he grunted.

In another fifty yards, the bronc slid down a patch of shale, and trotted onto the grassy valley. Its head fell to the earth for a mouthful of the luscious fodder. Lance jerked the reins and spurred it on.

Twisting in the saddle, he gazed up the ridge, but his eyes blurred, and he rubbed them with his hand. Again, he focused his eyes, swaying in the saddle. He made out a mass of timber and rock, with the blue sky above. And then, he thought he spied dark moving figures of horsemen.

"Jack Devlin!" Lance exclaimed, reaching for the Winchester in his saddle scabbard.

Swinging down from the saddle, he staggered away from the blue roan. It was a fight now to keep his head. He dropped to his knees for support, rifle in his hands, blinking at the ridge.

He had made no mistake. Three riders were coming down the slope hard. And the leader was dressed in a fancy red silk shirt covered by a calfskin vest. His white beaver-skin hat was proof of his identity. It was Jack Devlin.

Lance cocked the Winchester. "He figures that Maverick wounded me," the puncher growled. "He must have heard the shootin' from a distance. He's coming on."

Lance lay flat, bracing himself by his elbows, watching the horses skirting the steeper descent. He saw Jack halt and dismount. The last of the Devlins gestured for his two aids to fan out, and then Jack came on, moving from tree to crag for shelter.

"I'm waitin'!" Lance shouted.

Three shots crashed from the rocks of the ridge, and the lead struck hard on the ground around Lance.

"Maverick!" Jack Devlin's voice sounded. "We've got Brewster cornered in the open. Come a-runnin'. Let Prairie an' Stovepipe go!"

A hard grin stole across Lance's tanned features.

"Take me by your lonesome, Jack," he shouted. "Yuh've often threatened to do it."

Again, Jack's weapon crashed three times up on the ridge, and his lead fell short. He seemed to be having difficulty in seeing the Silver Arrow boss in the tall grass. His shots were plainly a signal to his brothers, whom he thought were with him. But those shots drew somebody whom Jack Devlin was not counting upon.

A wild Comanche war whoop echoed from the top of the ridge, followed by a hair-raising screech from a shriller voice.

Lance caught his breath. Anywhere, at any time, he'd have recognized the fighting yell of Prairie, who had guided settlers through Indian territory. And Stovepipe's imitation of that yowl was unmistakable.

"Scum an' rattlesnakes!" Stovepipe's voice rang out. "I'm cuttin' yuh up fer my next beef stew. We've got 'cm without hosses, an' they're poachin' on our range. Wipe 'em out, Prairie!"

"Hold 'em, Lance!" Prairie's cry sounded.

Lance gritted his teeth. He heard Jack Devlin shout in alarm. The fancy-dressed outlaw's figure leaped out from hiding in the rocks. It was too late for him to go back for his bronc. He seemed intent on taking his chances on getting to Lance's blue roan.

"Maverick!" he yelled. "Monte! Whar are yuh?"

"Dead, by my gun, Jack!" Lance called. "An' yo're next."

Jack Devlin's gun thundered, and a bullet plowed into the ground under Lance's nose. The Silver Arrow boss waited for no more. He reared to his knees, rifle whipping to his shoulder. He saw Jack Devlin darting right and left down the base of the ridge.

Lance triggered, and knew that he missed as the Winchester kicked hard against his shoulder. He worked the lever frantically, but the weapon jammed. It was the first unlucky break that day. Lance threw himself flat, tugging at a six-gun.

One of Jack Devlin's bullets snatched a handful of his hair. Lance knew that the next would get him, because Jack was halting to take better aim. Lance whipped up his gun barrel, fanning the hammer with a left palm, shooting desperately with every cartridge to bag his foe. He sprayed his lead all around Jack Devlin, keeping his eyes fastened on the outlaw's red shirt.

Jack's six-gun flamed, and its lead nicked Lance's arm. But Jack Devlin was going down, breaking at the knees, shrieking with hatred. The weapon in his hand was swinging wide. Its last shot went wild, and Jack pitched forward on his face on the valley floor.

Lance's gun hammer clicked on empties. He swayed on his knees, blinking at the sight of the last of the Devlin clan not fifty feet away, still in death.

And on up the ridge, rifles were crashing as Prairie and Stovepipe charged the two outlaws who had made the mistake of riding with the Devlins. Lance heard the last yelps of the tough pair. He fell to his right side, holding his left, listening to Stovepipe and Prairie's triumphant shouts.

"Vengeance," Lance muttered. "The Devlins wanted it, an' got the wrong end of the gun. A good name for this range—Vengeance Valley."

The jingle of spurs drew Lance's eyes to the foot of the ridge, where the scout and the cook were coming toward him.

"How are yuh, Lance?" Prairie called. "What's wrong?"

"Flesh wound from Maverick," the Silver Arrow boss replied. "I'll need some Injun herbs, pard. Yuh know what does the trick. Where's Ham?"

Stovepipe dropped to his knees beside the cowboy. "That fool?" the baldhead questioned. "We passed him not long ago. Me an' Prairie got the herd up to the pass and sent

it down the gulch to this valley. The stock is comin' in now. But Ham can't walk."

"What's wrong?" Lance asked, as Prairie ripped open his shirt to inspect his wound.

"A can o' chocolate sirup fell on his big toe an' broke it," Stovepipe chuckled. "Ham's crawlin' on his hands an' knees like a ground hawg."

"Chocolate sirup?" Lance questioned. "What was he carryin' that stuff for?"

Prairie coughed in embarrassment, and Stovepipe's face twisted in contempt.

"That's fer the cake I'm bakin' in celebration o' the new range," the cook growled. "Yuh see, we got two gluttons in the outfit, an' they stole my sweetenin'. I ain't mentionin' no names, Lance, because we don't want no feudin' in this valley. But it looks like me an' yuh are goin' ter eat that cake all by our lonesome."

Lance grinned through the pain of his wound.

"We might invite a sheep-herdin' outfit over the ridge to the party," he said. "After they've counted a few corpses around these parts, they might take a notion to clear out. Yore cake, Stovepipe, would certainly start 'em runnin' hard."

"What do yuh mean?" Stovepipe demanded.

"The last one yuh baked had rotten eggs," Lance replied.

"That's right," Prairie spoke up, grinning. "I remember it!"

"Yuh do, do yuh?" Stovepipe yelled wrathfully. "That's because I sent Ham ter town ter get eggs, an' he found a buzzard's nest on the way. I've been carryin' a dozen eggs along fer a hull two weeks fer that cake. But yuh'll never taste it. Neither o' yuh."

"I'd just as soon have huckleberry pie," Prairie drawled.

"Me, too," Lance added.

"Yuh wanted cake before," Stovepipe roared, "an' that's what yuh'll get! Do yuh think I'm runnin' a city hotel?"

"Then, I reckon we'll have ter eat the cake," Prairie chuckled.

"If Ham ain't swallowed two quarts o' chocolate," Lance concluded.

Slim Harkness

1. For several weeks, there had been no sign of Two-shot Caldwell, and Slim Harkness settled down to learn the cow business on Dan Rawlins's Circle R. On round-up, he went out with old Wyoming to learn how to throw the lariat.

2. On his first try for a running calf, he missed by a mile. Wyoming chuckled good-naturedly, for his range-wise eyes saw that Slim had the makin's of a cowpoke. All he needed was practice. So Wyoming told him to go try another dogie.

3. Gritting his teeth and swearing that he wouldn't fail, this time, Slim lit out after a wild-eyed dogie. His pony brought him close to it, and Slim cast his loop. To his delight, the noose sailed straight and true toward the calf.

4. As the loop dropped, Slim's cow horse braced its hoofs and came to an abrupt stop. Slim wasn't expecting that—or ready for it. He lost his balance and went sailing out of the saddle as Wyoming and another waddy rode up.

Learns A Lesson

5. Back at the round-up camp, later in the day, Slim came in for a lot of good-natured kidding from the cowpokes. Also some that wasn't so good-natured. One waddy, known as "Curly," was definitely nasty in what he had to say.

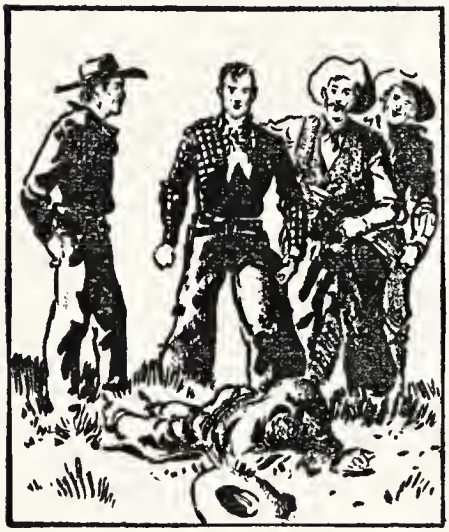
6. Suddenly Curly flipped the rope he was carrying and dropped a hard loop around Slim's neck. A quick jerk, and Slim sprawled head-first to the ground, choking and gasping for breath. Silence suddenly gripped the other waddies.

7. Curly loosened the rope. Throwing it off, Slim got quickly to his feet. "What's the idea, Curly?" he asked. "You lookin' for trouble?" Curly gave a sneering laugh. "I was jest givin' yuh a lesson in ropin', slick-ear," he said.

8. "An' now, dang yuh, I'll give yuh another," he went on. "Yo're too fresh an' need——" He broke off and swung a terrific right-hand blow at Slim's chin. But Slim knew something about boxing and ducked the blow.

9. Curly was heavier than Slim, but a whole lot dumber. Slim stepped in and hung a long, hard left on Curly's chin. The punch shook Señor Curly to his boot heels, but wasn't quite enough to knock him down. He swore and charged in wildly.

10. Slim met Curly's charge with another hefty punch. And the combination of the speed of the charge and the steam of the punch resulted in a blow that sounded almost as loud as a gunshot. Slim thought he'd broken his knuckles.



11. Curly didn't think about anything—not for several minutes, at any rate. He collapsed like a wet sack and lay limp and motionless on the ground. The other waddies laughed, congratulating Slim. Curly wasn't popular with the crew.

12. Next day, Slim rode circle, looking for stray cattle to drive in to the main holding ground. As he topped a low ridge, he spotted a column of blue smoke rising from a clump of trees, a mile away. Suspicious, he started toward it.

13. Slim was new to the cow business, but he knew very well what wood smoke meant on the range: Rustlers! Grim-faced, he kept on toward the grove of trees. It didn't occur to him that he might be met by a blast of gunfire and hot lead.

14. He approached quietly, his hand on his gun butt. And suddenly, through a break in the trees, he caught sight of Curly. The ugly waddy had killed a Circle R cow and was now branding the calf with a Rafter X. He was a mavericker!

15. Curly was so busy at his branding that he didn't hear Slim coming till the latter was almost upon him. Then he whirled with a wild oath, his gun leaping out and flaming. But Slim's gun roared a split second faster.

16. Curly went down with Slim's bullet through his heart. He lay beside the hog-tied calf and not far from the dead cow. Slim slammed three shots in the air as a signal for the others to come and see the plain evidence of Curly's crookedness.

Next Week: "A Stampede For Slim Harkness."

Fiddlin' Joe's Song Corral

This department is for the purpose of preserving the old cowboy songs and Western range ballads, and their history. Readers can help in this work by sending in any such songs that they know, especially those handed down by word of mouth by parents, grandparents, and other old-time Westerners. The story of the song, how it came to be written, and the facts on which it is based should accompany the words whenever possible.

Address all letters to Fiddlin' Joe, care of Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

HYAR we are ag'in, gatherin' round the ol' fiddle tuh sing the ol' songs. I sure hope thet each an' every one o' yuh readers manages tuh git out West sometime. It stands tuh reason thet a section of this country thet's sung up so fine, more'n any other part, beats 'em all. So I hope yuh git thar!

Kenneth Ireland, of New York, sent in a few songs when he wrote last, an' hyar's one of 'em—a song by our ol' friend, E. A. Brininstool:

THE OLD BUNK HOUSE

'Tis empty an' silent, all sagging and creaking,
With windows agape to the breezes that blow;
The rafters are cobwebbed, the hinges are squeaking,
As idly the wind swings the door to and fro.

The dust and the mold have left visible traces;
The hearthstone is cold, and 'tis cheerless and strange
And vainly I search for the bronzed fearless faces
Of riders I bunked with while riding the range.

I listen for voices of old pals to greet me,
But out of the shadows no echoes I hear;
No rough hearty handclasps of punchers to meet me;
No laughter or singing falls sweet on my ear.

The pack rats go scampering boldly around there
And squeak their defiance about the dim room;
And nothing but grim desolation is found there—
The place is abandoned to silence and gloom.

The empty corrals have no dust clouds arising
Where restless cow ponies are milling inside;
No loud-swearing punchers in vain devising
Some means of subduing a range outlaw's pride.

The long straggling columns of cattle have vanished;
The draws and coulees are empty and lone;
The plow and the reaper the brand irons have banished
No more is the saddle the Westerner's throne.

'Tis only a relic of song and of story,
The bunk house that stands in sunshine and rain;
A silent reminder of cattle-day glory
That leaves me a feeling of sadness and pain.
But often I think, in my fireside dreaming
Of days when the cowman was monarch and king
And picture in fancy the bunk-house lights gleaming
Where echoed the trails song the cowboys would sing.

Thet's a kind of gloomy song tuh begin our singin' with, ain't it? An old man's feelin's when he thinks of his youth and finds the pertickler places he used tuh know as full of song an' life given up tuh cobwebs an' rats, are bound tuh be sad, I reckon.

But the Westerner's throne is still the saddle, fer all o' thet. An' the cowboy still rides on the range seekin' out strays an' bringin' 'em back tuh the full herd.

Now, hyar's one of my favorite songs. Some of yuh have heard it before, but I want tuh be sure thet yuh all have it in yore scrapbooks, so hyar goes!

THE KILLER

Dobe Bill, he came a-riding
From the canyon, in the glow
Of a quiet Sunday morning
From the town of Angelo;
Ridin' easy on the pinto
That he dearly loved to straddle,
With a six-gun and sombrero
That was wider than his saddle.
And he's hummin' as he's ridin'
Of a simple little song
That's a-rumblin' through the cactus
As he's gallopin' along:

"Oh, I've rid from San Antony
Through the mesquite and the sand.
I'm a r'arin', flarin' bucko,
Not afraid to play my hand.
I'm a hootin', shootin' demon
And I has my little fun
With my pinto called Apache
And Adolphus—that's my gun."

Straight to Santa Fe he drifted,
And he mills around the town,
Sort o' gittin' of his bearin's
While he pours his liquor down.
But he's watchin'—always watchin'—
Every hombre in the place,
Like he's mebbe sort o' lookin'
For some certain hombre's face.

Then one night he saunters careless
To the place of "Monte Sam,"
And he does a bit of playin'
Like he doesn't give a damn.
All at once it's still and quiet,
Like a calm before a blow,
And the crowd is tense and nervous,
And the playin's stopped and slow.

At the bar a man is standin'
Sneerin' as his glances lay.
Like a challenge did he fling 'em,
Darin' 'em to make a play.
"Two-gun" Blake, the Pecos killer,
Hated, feared wherever known,
Stood and drank his glass of mescal
With assurance all his own.

Then the eyes of Blake, the killer,
Caught the glance of Dobe Bill,
And they held each one the other
With the steel of looks that kill.
Then the tones of Blake came slowly,
With a sneer in every word:
"Well, you've found me!" But the other
Gave no sign he saw or heard.

Walkin' calmly toward the speaker,
He advanced with steady pace.
Then he grinned and quick as lightnin'
Slapped him squarely in the face.
"Shoot, you snake!" he whispered hoarsely.
"Shoot, you lily-livered cur!
Draw! You're always strong for killin';
Now I'm here to shoot for *her!*"

Some there was that claimed they saw it,
As the killer tried to draw—
But there's no one knows for certain
Just exactly what they saw.
I'll agree the shootin' started
Quick as Blake had made his start—
Then a brace of bullets hit him
Fair and certain through his heart.

As he fell, his hand was graspin'
  Of the gun he'd got too late,
With the notches on it showin'
  Like the vagaries of fate.
And the man who stood there lookin'
  At the killer as he lay,
Murmured: "Nell, I've kept my promise
  I have made the scoundrel pay!"

Dobe Bill, he went a-ridin'
  From the town of Santa Fe
On a quiet Sunday morning,
  Goin' happy on his way,
Ridin' happy on thet pinto
  That he dearly loved to straddle,
With his six-gun and sombrero
  That was wider than his saddle.

And he's hummin' as he's goin'
  Of a simple little song
That's a-boomin' through the cactus
  As he's gallopin' along:

"Oh, I'm goin' down the valley,
  Through the mesquite and the sand.
I'm a r'arin', flarin' bucko,
  Not afraid to play my hand.
I'm a hootin', shootin' demon
  And I has my little fun
With my broncho called Apache
  And Adolphus—that's my gun."

Thar yuh be, folks! Be good till I see yuh ag'in!

SCOUTS TRAPPED

Two brave scouts, Nate Marshall and Bill Davis, both noted for their fearlessness and the speed of their draw, were ordered to take dispatches to General Sheridan at Camp Supply. The scouts arrived on time and were sent back to Fort Dodge with dispatches and mail for the soldiers there. But they never arrived.

When they were only about twenty miles from Fort Dodge, they saw a band of Arapahoes and Cheyennes riding out of the brush on the Mulberry. Before the Indians saw them, the scouts hid themselves in a cut, which was deep enough to conceal them and their horses. They stayed there until the Indians had passed out of sight.

But one of the red men had straggled a long way behind the band. As he approached, Marshal dismounted, and made signs to the lone Indian to come to him, assuring him that he would not be hurt.

Marshal was friendly with the Cheyennes and liked them. He did not think they ever killed white men, except when they felt that they had not been fairly treated, or when they wanted to get back at them after losing a fight.

He could not believe that they would kill him, because he was their friend, but he was mistaken. When he signaled the Indian to come to him, the man was badly frightened, thinking he had fallen into a trap. He shot off his pistol, and this brought the whole band back in a furious dash. The scouts raced for the timber on the creek bottom, but the odds were too great.

The Indians fired upon them from every side, and the unfortunate men were soon killed. They had been riding fine horses, one of which was shot to death, the other one being taken alive by the Cheyennes.

The Arapahoes wanted it, and they claimed that it should be given to them, because they were more numerous than the Cheyennes. The dispute became violent, and one of the Indians drew his gun and shot the horse dead.

Then he said, "Whichever side wants the horse now, may take it."

This ended the dispute, and the Indians rode away, leaving the bodies of the white scouts where they had fallen.

The Wranglers Corner

The Range Boss will be glad to consider contributions from beginners and amateur writers and artists.

The contributions will be judged on their merits as amateur contributions. The work of professionals is not desired.

Manuscripts should preferably be typed, on one side of the paper only, and double-spaced. However, full consideration will be given to manuscripts neatly hand-written in ink.

The author's name and address and age should appear on the first page.

Stories should not exceed five hundred words, and verses should not exceed twenty lines. Only Western subjects should be chosen.

Drawings should be in India ink on plain white paper. No pencil or crayon drawings can be used. Only Western subjects should be chosen.

All published material will be paid for at good space rates.

Manuscripts that are not used cannot be returned, but an effort will be made to return drawings, provided it is especially requested, and a stamped, addressed envelope is inclosed for that purpose.

Address all contributions to the WRANGLERS CORNER, c/o Street & Smith's Wild West Weekly, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

IT ain't often thet the Whistlin' Kid poses as an art critic or an authority on elegant writin' an' sech. As yuh knows, us in the Corner bases our jedgment on whether we likes a thing or not, an' nawthin' else. But this week the Kid perks up an' says:

"Don't it strike yuh, Boss, thet yuh an' me an' the rest of us would 'a' had the heck of a time gittin' our work accepted when we was younkers like most o' the amachoors?"

"We shore would," agrees Sonny Tabor. "Seems like these amachoors has had a hull lot more schoolin' than we ever had."

"Are yuh mournin' 'cause yuh missed yore callin' by not bein' a college perfesser, Sonny?" chuckles Slim Harkness.

"Yuh mought 'a' been one yoreself, Slim," speaks up Tommy Rockford, "ef yuh hadn't skipped out o' thet boardin' school yuh was in."

"How do yuh account fer the improvement younkers show ter-day over what younkers o' the past done, Boss?" asks Sonny. "Are they smarter?"

"Mebbe no smarter," we says, "but they kiver a hull lot more ground than what we done in the little red schoolhouse. Most o' these amachoors is of high-school age, too, an' we never got thet fur."

"An' the Corner offers 'em a plumb fine chance tuh put intuh practice what they learn in the classroom," speaks up Tommy Rockford.

"Thet's jest what they're doin', Tommy," we tells him, "an' it's why we're gittin' encouragin' letters from parents an' school perfessers as sees good in what we're doin'. Listen ter this story an' jedge fer yoreself."

THE IDEAL DEPUTY

By Robert Parker—Age 13
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

As "Chip" Jordan went through the gate of his father's big ranch, he felt that something was wrong.

He had been away a year, working here and there, during which his father had had his right hand shot off. Chip thought it was good to be coming back home to work for his father.

As he rode on up toward the ranch house, he remembered that his father kept only honest cowboys on his ranch. But these who were here now looked everything but.

Chip went up to one of the men and said: "Could you tell me where the boss is?"

"You'll find him up to the house," came back the answer.

"Thanks," said Chip and went up to the house, where there was a man sitting on the porch.

Chip spoke to him. "Is the boss around?" he asked.

For reply, the man said: "I'm the boss around these parts; Tom Hudson's the name. I own this range if it's any of your business."

Chip Jordan almost fell out of his saddle when he heard this, for he knew his father would never have sold his old home.

Chip's hunch had been right. There was something wrong, and so he said: "I'm Chip Jordan. My dad, Bill Jordan, owned this place not two months ago, for he wrote me a letter."

"Glad to know you, Chip Jordan," came the sneering reply, "I bought this ranch not a month ago and can prove it."

"Let's see the deed, then," said Chip.

Chip followed the sneering Hudson inside the house and over to the safe.

Hudson turned the dial a few times and pulled the door open.

"Here it is," he said. "See for yourself."

Chip Jordan was seeing, but something the crooked Hudson wasn't expecting.

"Well?" asked Hudson.

For answer, Chip said: "Draw, you dirty skunk, because I'm going to shoot you down like you did my dad, if you don't!"

At this, Hudson's face turned pale and his hand went for his gun. But before he could get it out, there were two shots, both coming from the smoking guns of Chip Jordan, and Tom Hudson was no more, for he lay on the floor dead.

Chip spoke to the men coming in the door: "You better scram or this might meet up with you," he said. And they did.

The next day, Chip went into Rosewood and told the sheriff what had happened.

"For proof," he said, "I have the deed my father was supposed to have signed and a letter he did sign not two months ago. These, compared, show the signatures don't match. There is also dried blood on the floor beside the safe, and this morning, while looking around, I found where a big hole had been dug. There is where they buried my father after killing him."

"Son," said the sheriff, "you're an ideal deputy."

"I'd like ter seen Tommy Rockford write a story like thet when he was thirteen year old," chuckles Sonny Tabor.

"I don't reckon yuh was any too familiar with yore own A B C's 'bout thet time, either," snorts Tommy. "Them as criticize most is usually the thickest-haided."

"Thar, thar!" we puts in. "No gun play, now. With a C. A. man an' a railroad dick present, it ain't no place fer yuh ter act up, Sonny."

"I'm drawin' in my horns," laughs Sonny. "Let's hear the next one, Boss."

An' hyar 'tis.

WELCOME HOME

By W. T. Lowe, Jr.—Age 17
Pine Bluff, Arkansas

Clark Tremaine stepped out of the livery stable where he had just left his horse and saw "Buck" Morrell on the sidewalk in front of the Trail's End Saloon. A shudder ran through Clark's frame before he

could stop it. Some impulse told him to duck back into the shelter of the barn where Morrell couldn't see him.

Then a sneer twisted his lips, and he stood there in full view of the other man. Buck Morrell was tying his horse to the hitch rail in front of the saloon. He didn't glance toward Clark. A moment later, he had entered the building.

Clark walked slowly up the street. A six-gun rode low on his thigh. He had expected to see Morrell here in Wagontongue, but the sight of the man was like a physical shock to him. Clark hated Buck Morrell, and with good reason.

Clark had never forgotten that night three years ago when he had met the tinhorn. Clark had been living with an invalid uncle on a little spread north of town then. He had been nineteen, hardly more than a boy. To pass some time away he had bought into a poker game in one of Wagontongue's saloons.

During the game, Clark saw the flashily dressed stranger, who was Buck Morrell, deal himself some cards off the bottom of the deck. Clark called him on it. In the fight that followed, Clark was no match for Morrell who was taller and heavier and stronger than he was.

Morrell had beaten him unmercifully and left him lying in the dust of the street in front of the saloon. After that night, Buck Morrell had made life miserable for Clark at every chance he got. He taunted him, mocked him, and said he was yellow.

Finally, when his old uncle died, Clark left the country. The bank took the ranch —and Clark took the open trail.

Clark got a room at the hotel and left his saddlebags on the bed. On the street again, he paused to look around him. He did not see Buck Morrell. He knew a show-down was coming between them, but he wasn't going to push it or avoid it. That show-down was to come sooner than Clark thought.

Across the street was a restaurant; a few doors down was the Trail's End. Clark started across the street, heading for the restaurant. At the same instant Buck Morrell came out of the saloon and stepped out into the street. He did not see Clark; he was busy rolling a smoke.

The street was deserted; even the sidewalks had lost their usual array of loafers. Clark walked slowly down the street toward Morrell. The other did not see him until Clark stopped twenty feet away from him. Buck recognized him at once.

"Well," he said in his thick, oily voice, "look who's back in town." He would have gone on, but something in Clark's face stopped him.

Clark stood there in the street, his hands hanging at his sides, his eyes boring into Morrell's.

"Draw, Morrell!" he said in a level voice.

Buck Morrell could scarcely believe his ears. A challenge to a gun fight was the last thing he expected from Clark Tremaine.

"Draw!"

Morrell's face had gone pasty white. He knew he held the whip hand over the other no longer.

"Draw!"

Morrell made a sound like a cornered rat and went for his gun. It had barely cleared leather when Clark's shot whammed out. Buck's .45 jumped backward out of his hand like a living thing.

The tinhorn squealed and grabbed his throbbing arm. The fear of death shown brightly in his eyes as he looked at Clark. He opened his mouth to beg for his life, but he couldn't speak.

Without taking his eyes off Morrell's face, Clark raised his arm and pointed to where Morrell's horse stood hitched in front of the saloon. The tinhorn scurried to the rail and climbed into the saddle.

Clark pointed down the street at the trail that led out of town. Morrell tried to walk his horse, but his terror was too great. He lunged into a gallop and raced out of town. He would never set foot in Wagontongue again.

Clark Tremaine stood there in the street and watched the fleeing speck that was Buck Morrell vanish into the distance.

"Them welcomes home ain't allus what they're cracked up ter be," opines the Whistlin' Kid.

"Some hombres wouldn't feel ter home unless they was welcomed with six-gun music," says Sonny Tabor.

"Waal," we speaks up, "the gent in the next story shore got a six-gun welcome, though it wa'n't exactly home. Listen."

THE SPIDER'S LAST RIDE

By Ray Williams—Age 16

Ajo, Arizona

La Araña, the "Spider," was a gent to stay clear of, and most people did. The Spider was a ruthless killer, an outlaw of

the worst kind, a horse and cattle thief who ran his stolen stock into Mexico. He was part Mexican, part Apache, and could not control his hatred of gringos.

On one occasion, he captured two cowpunchers and chopped their right arms off at the elbows. He was reputed to have burned three men at the stake. He would kill any gringo who would give him a chance. For was it not gringos who had hanged his murdering and cattle-thieving father?

This morning the Spider smoked leisurely. There was not the least thing to worry him. He was three miles from the border and on the Mexican side. To-night he would raid the VH Ranch. To-morrow night he would be in his camp with two thousand American dollars in his pockets.

The Spider was wise. He sold his cattle only five miles over the line. Then they were no longer his worry. He got less for them, but the quicker he was rid of them, the better.

It was seven o'clock. The Spider and twelve bandits almost as vicious as himself, rode into Arizona after a day's rest on the other side.

After riding about two miles, the Spider stopped, ordered a halt. He held up a crudely drawn map.

"I have showed you thees map. Eet tell where thees cattle we steal ees. Eet tell also where thees guards be. Luis! Juan! José! You keel thees guard, then help us drive thees cows."

Whoom! Boom! Bam!

Had something gone wrong with the Spider's plans? Two of his men dropped to the ground, dead. *Boom!* another fell with a broken arm. The others scurried for cover behind rocks and bushes. The battle was on; fire cut through the darkness on all sides. The Spider had walked into a trap!

"Ramon! Ramon! Come queeck!" Ramon was by his chief's side almost immediately. "Ramon, get horses queeck; we go!"

The Spider was running out on his men when they needed him most. He was a coward.

Ramon returned quickly. The two mounted in the cover of darkness and rode away.

There were hoofbeats behind them. They spurred their horses to greater speed. Bullets began to whine over their heads.

There was a turn in the trail. The Spider jerked his horse's head in that direction, but the horse didn't turn.

The Spider took one last look back; saw Ramon pitch from his horse. Then he felt himself falling rapidly through space. He screamed. There was a thud, screams, then another. The Spider was no more.

"I should say," says Slim Harkness, "that the Spider went ter the only home he had comin' ter him, said home bein' Boot Hill."

"Yo're l'arnin' fast, younker," we chuckles. "Yo're gittin' ter talk like a real Westerner. Them perfessers back in the school yuh beat it from ought ter hear yuh now."

"How about a pome?" speaks up Tommy Rockford.

"Right hyar," we replies. "See how yuh like this un."

A LOST PARD

By Marie Tallman

Sidney, Ohio

The sun doesn't seem so bright to-day,
  Nor the sky such a beautiful blue.
The reason? You'll laugh when I say it's because
  My pony can't see it, too.

He wasn't a thoroughbred, I know,
  But his heart was gold all the way.
He would work till he dropped and then work some more,
  My confidence not to betray.

All he asked in return was a little grain,
  And now and then a kindly pat.
Can you say as much for your human friends?
  Can you show me one like that?

Through summer's heat and winter's cold,
  He carried me over the trail.
He seemed to understand our job,
  That we had to get through with the mail.

I'm not ashamed of my sorrow
  And the tears I shed o'er his grave.
If mourning a friend is cowardice,
  Then I don't want to be brave.

THE PAY-OFF

By Ruby Anderson—Age 20

Hixson, Tennessee

Just on time, the stage rolled in.
She'd reached her longed-for goal.
There were on board a lot of men
And the Brightstone Mine pay roll.

All at once, a shot rang out.
The driver fell down to the ground.
From the brush there came a shout,
And an outlaw leaped out with a bound.

"Reach fer th' sky!" They all obeyed—
All but one who was standing there.
He grabbed his gun. They heard him say:
"I'll kill yuh, skunk! Say yore prayer!"

Two shots were heard and with a start
They gazed at the youth who'd saved the day.
For he'd drilled the thief right through the heart,
And he said to them: "He got his pay!"
On his shirt a spot began to grow.
They placed him on a bed.
"He shot my dad," he whispered low.
With a gasp, the youth was dead.

"Thet winds us up fer ter-night," we says. "An' fer them o' yuh thet won't be back next week, hyar's wishin' yuh a plumb fine Thanksgivin'."

But we ain't thinkin' about who'll be hyar fer Thanksgivin'. We're wonderin' ef the tooth we lost sence last year will put us at too much of a disadvantage when we tackles the turkey.

An', too we're hopin' thet plenty of amachoors will find somethin' ter be thankful fer in next week's Corner. THE RANGE BOSS

COMIN' NEXT WEEK!

LONE STAR BUCKAROO

Novelette

By WALKER TOMPKINS

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LOOT FOR A GUN GAMBLER

Novelette

By WILLIAM A. TODD

Risky McKee an' his pard, Sufferin' Joe, run afoul o' the law an' have to do plenty six-gun slingin' to get out o' the jam.

DEAD LINE FOR DOGIES

Novelette

By GUY L. MAYNARD

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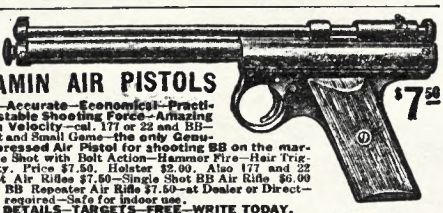

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MEN WITH CARS to sell new electric arc welder to mechanics, repairmen, factories. Wholesales $2.50. Five minutes demonstration makes sales. Up to 150% profit. Trindl Products, 2225-BW Calumet, Chicago.

Old Money Wanted

$500.00 PAID for certain Indian Head Cents. Large Cents $2000.00. Half Dollars $1500.00, etc. Send Dime For Complete Catalogue. Romanocoinshop, Dept. 142, Nantasket, Mass.

OLD MONEY WANTED. Will pay Fifty Dollars for nickel of 1913 with Liberty head (no Buffalo). I pay cash premiums for all rare coins. Send 4c for Large Coin Folder. May mean much profit to you. B. Max Mehl, 440 Mehl Bldg., Fort Worth, Texas.

For Inventors

HAVE YOU a sound, practical invention for sale, patented or unpatented? If so, write Chartered Institute of American Inventors, Dept. 42, Washington, D. C.

Crayon Sketches

BREEZY CHARACTER SKETCH in Crayon—19x25 inches—Made from any photograph—One dollar. Imperial Studio, Box 549, New Castle, Pennsylvania.

Frog Raising

RAISE GIANT FROGS! WE BUY! Good prices year round. Small pond starts you. Free book. American Frog Canning (190-T) New Orleans, Louisiana.

Learn TAP DANCING IN YOUR OWN HOME!

Your choice of the following complete TAP Dance routines: Waltz Clog, Buck and Wing, Truckin', Soft Shoe, Eccentric, Shim Sham Shimmy, Military Buck Dance, Novelty Baseball Dance.

COMPLETE ROUTINE ONLY 50c
8 Routines complete $3. on Money Back basis

ROY GOULD'S STUDIO
P. O. Box 62, Clinton Hill, Newark, N. J.

OUR SENSATIONAL NEW 1938 CATALOG NOW READY! NEARLY 600 PAGES OF UNUSUAL NOVELTIES, SEND 10c FOR IT!

BROADCAST thru your radio TALK - SING - PLAY

BROADCAST your voice or programs coming through your own radio set—make announcements from any part of the house—project wise cracks, josh and mystify friends. Imitate radio stars, practice crooning, singing, radio acting, etc. Do a "Ben Bernie" or a "Rudy Vales."

World Mike

Made especially for home use, attached in a jiffy without tools. Not a toy. Put on your own programs at home, parties, clubs, fairs, etc. Barrels of fun! Easy to operate.

Price Postpaid 25c

DELUXE MIKE

Large, substantial, sensitive mike, broadcast clear music, speech, singing, etc., over your own radio. Reproduces voice in loud clear tone with distortion. Regular table model—can be held in hand. Guaranteed. Price, $1.00 attached.

BLANK CARTRIDGE PISTOL

REVOLVER STYLE

50c $1.00

Two models now sold at 50c and $1. Well made pistol. Realistic. Pattern as close to real Revolver. Also Blank Cartridges will scare burglar. Take 22 Cal. Blank Cartridges obtainable everywhere. Great joke on boys, parties, dances, etc. Fires it laying around without its drawing attention as real revolvers. Fine for 4 Fourth July, New Years, Jubilee or celebration shooting. Size 8½ in. Two sizes, Medium size 50c. Large size $1.00. Blank cartridges 50c per pkg. Holster (cowboy type) 50c. Shipped Express Collect.

Cigaret Pistol

Looks like a dangerous automatic, but shoots harmless cigarettes. Fine for Bizzes reveals. Disappears in a jiffy. Amazed friends. Handsome Triangle. Nickel finish, perfectly safe in perfect. Price... 25c

Pea Shooter

Peashooter automatic pea shooter holds 15 peas, shoots them accurately as fast as you can load. Looks like real pistol. Shoots pea 30 feet. Powerful. Price 25c. Neatest. Only... 25c

Cap Pistol

A snappy automatic cap pistol performed like real Luger gun. Automatic detail. Novelty for protection. Given away free. Fine for fooling. Can output 1000 shots. Powerful. Price 25c. Neatest. Only... 25c

Air Pistol

High powered, accurate air pistol. Fires shot and pellets with amazing accuracy. Air-rifle power; target practice. Fine for fooling. Shot sheet, $2.50. 100 shot sheet, $3.00.

ALL WAVE WORLD WIDE RADIOS

Be marvelous result—simple operation—low priced $5 to $60 models. Gets police calls, aircraft, amateurs, ships, broadcast, short wave and domestic broadcasts, etc. with remarkable volume and efficiency. Each set complete without tube, ready to operate. Sizes 8x5x5 in. **ONE TUBE BATTERY KIT $1.55** Wired, ready to operate. **$2.30. SUPERTWO TUBE BATTERY** Gives better volume and selectivity. Receiver, Complete Kit, **$2.75. ELECTRIC TWO TUBE** Operates on house current. Uses no batteries. Complete Kit, **$2.00.** Wired, ready to operate, **$3.75.**

MIDGET POCKET RADIO $1.00

Listen to Music Programs and Sports everywhere You Go—Loud Tone

Good reception with beautiful clear tone! The amazing midget pocket radio gives you all the entertainment of a radio wherever you are—in the country, in bed, in a tram, office, etc., etc. **ANYWHERE** Operates on a single penlight battery, yet it operates perfectly. Beautiful clear tone. Remarkable volume. No static or noise. No batteries, no tubes, no crystals to adjust. Nothing to wear out. Nothing old to break. Nothing to get out of order. Perfectly reliable design. Uses regular Aerial. Earphone, Mike, Phone & Radio Set $1.79. Earphone, Mike, Phone & Radio Set $1.79. Postpaid $1.00.

FIELD GLASSES 25c

What a bargain! Best German powerful field glasses ever made. Magnification. Center focusing. Finger focusing. Permits full unhampered use of both eyes that gives remarkable results. Ideal for nature study, hiking, sports, and a million other uses. Complete with cord. Packed in box. Only... 25c

JU-JITSU DON'T BE BULLIED

30c

The Japanese art of self-defense, new methods of Ju-Jitsu, defeat any opponent, illustrated so that you cannot fail to understand them. Deals full with trips, throws, wrist locks, hold, defense against revolvers, strangling, knifings, scissors, arm bar, hammerlock, hobbling, man-handling, double knee throw, quick attack, defense against knife, defense against two knifes, defense against two knifes, hold, stomach throw, secret thumb hold, knockout, nerve pinches, and numerous others. Learn to protect yourself in the all circumstances with natural weapons. Easy to man, guns or knives! Simple to do. Only 30c.

CRYSTAL RADIO 25c

This is a radio in itself as it is possible to get reception with it alone within 25 miles of a station and up to 100 miles under good conditions. All you need is an earphone, or complete earphone set, or amplifier with superheterodyne crystal, stand-base, crystal cup, arm with cat's whisker. Use Receiving earphones, 25c. Single Earphone, 69c. Aerial Kit, 65c.

Pocket Telescope

Eagle-Eye Vision

Six Power 25c

Big, 3 draw, unwieldy. Full telescope for only 25c! Swell for outdoors, nature study, sports, looking at the moon. Converted into a fine telescope by using smoked glass. Very, very swell! Price, 25c. Postpaid 25c.

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$1

A real Electric Movie Machine for only 35c! Shows pictures 3 times as large as 14 inches in size. Just insert the film, turn the crank and view the pictures as long as you like! Uses 2 flashlight cells obtainable everywhere. Fine for home, parties, fairs, carnivals, etc. Shipped complete with 10 feet of film, ready to use. Price, Complete with Film, 35c. Film 1 ft. 5c. Postpaid 10c. Film 1 ft. 5c. Postpaid 10c.

Wireless Transmitter Broadcasting Set

First again! First with the low-priced crystal radio, then the famous World Mike, then the All Wave World Wide Radios, then the Dollar Pocket Radio, and **NOW** a genuine RADIO TRANSMITTER, that sends out messages by wireless, for only $1.00, plus 10c postage. Note these sensational Features:

★ **Can be picked up on a suitable Radio Receiver.**
★ **Not a Mike, but a complete Broadcasting Set**
★ **Complete with Key, in Kit Form**
★ **Plug-in to any AC-DC circuit**
★ **Uses 2 oscillating tubes**

Complete Transmitter, $1.00 plus 10c post. Tubes (uses 2) Each 50c

WONDERFUL X-RAY 10c

CREAT CURIOSITY! With it you can see-through the bones in the hands, head in pepper, even the fish sticks in tomato-sauce. Always ready for test. Only 10c... 10c

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Big jumbo 3½x2½ in. Pop Eye is revealar home-bank and a swell novelty. Pop Eye's head is the opening. Insert coin in Pop Eye's mouth, pull lever and Pop Eye delivers a terrific knockout punch, knocking his opponent flat on the canvas and retrieves put-money in lower half, pulling down lever. Unbreakable and lasting. Price Postpaid 25c

FORTUNE TELLING CARDS

Tomorrow? What will it bring for you? What will happen to you? Fortune Telling Cards predict the future of a girl, a boy, a

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Radio & Television Books

How to build a superhetero-dyne radio receiver, radio circuits, radio and television sets, television set, etc. Each BOOK is well illustrated. Price, Each 10c

LEARN HYPNOTIZE

Hypnotize your friends, control your wishes and commands against their will! This amazing book teaches you the science of hypnotism and clairvoyance, explaining how to employ them. Be the master of every situation. Price 25c

Quartermaster - Navy - CCC - Marine - Army - Aviation

Handsomely embossed emblem rings made to resemble rings worn by men in U.S. Government service. Jumbo size, accurate detail, with navy in natural colors, travel American Eagle, State Size and ring desired. SILVER APPEARANCE..... 25c
Sterling Silver $1.00, 14 kt. Gold Plate $1.75.

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Sensational new Personal Photo Ring finish. Said by hobbyists new picture, good luck. Brilliant finish, looks like real silver. Jumbo size 35c. Regular size 25c. Price... 25c

Skull & Crossbones

Oxidized gunmetal finish. Bright finish. Brilliant finish imitation ruby eyes. Our most popular 25c ring. Price... 25c

YACHT CAPS

25c

Smart, snappy. Just what every real boy is wearing. Cool and comfortable. White Twill Yacht Cap, with black Yacht Cap, regulation quality duck, white celluloid cap, oval band, brass buttons and red, white and blue cockade on front, flared crown. Price postpaid... 25c

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Curious Cigarette Stinkers can be placed in any cigarette, then the victim, lights and smokes it, and the stinkers start stinking off an awful "stink." A mad joke for everybody. Price 10c

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Secret methods, make money by reporting news. Good pay for amateurs. Thrilling. Only 25c

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Popular flying model. Open seat job, accurate model of real plane. Complete kits, 12" wingspan. Model is a swell room model. Long, high, graceful. Price Only..... 12c

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Jumbo 24" wing-span. Amazing easy to fly. Looks like an eagle. Long, high, graceful. Price Only..... 25c

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Copy of England's famous fighters—the best in the world. Flies with marvelous grace and speed. Complete, 25c. Price Only..... 25c

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Standard contest endurance model. Flies continuously for 3 to 4 minutes. Climbs high. Easy to build and easy to fly. Complete kit, 15c. Price Only..... 25c

CHAMELEON 35c

ALIVE PET

WATCH IT CHANGE COLOR!

Out one of the most wonderful of all creatures. Watch it change color instantly in light. Wear one on the front of your coat as a curiosity. Shows out its tong, a to catch flies and insects for food. Very grateful to you. Can go for months without food. About 4 in. long. Ship to any place in USA in mail. Price 35c. Five "Fifteen" 25 cents. Price..... 25c. Five "Twenty" 25 cents. Price..... 25c. Five "Twenty-Five" 25 cents. Price..... 25c. Five "Twenty-Five" 25 cents. Price..... 25c. Five "Twenty-Five

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Camels are the Largest-Selling cigarette in America!

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